A Transnational Bohemia:

Dandyism and the Dance in the Futurist Art

of Gino Severini, 1909-1914

by

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Department of Art, Art History and Visual Studies
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Roberto Dainotto

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation studies the intersection of popular entertainment and the visual arts in Paris during the first decades of the twentieth century and the dialogue that formed between this subculture and the avant-garde factions of Paris and Italy. While this project focuses on the Italian Futurist Gino Severini (1883-1966), it is not conceived of as a monograph. Instead I will use Severini as a case study to help make sense of a complicated world in which the boundaries between bohemia and the bourgeoisie, masculinity and femininity, and art and popular culture are transgressed and blurred. Severini is particularly well suited to this discussion because nearly all of the 170 paintings, sketches, and pastels that he produced between the time that he arrived in Paris in 1906 and the outbreak of the First World War take as their subject a prime example of Parisian popular culture—Montmartre’s dance-halls. My study will address how form and content interrelate in these works, analyzing the ongoing evolution of his style and the manner in which he developed his imagery to cater to both commercial and avant-garde audiences. In order to make sense of his artistic career and to divine the importance of his life and work to the greater political and cultural environment of early twentieth-century Europe, I will also explore Severini’s actual participation in dance-hall culture, his self-fashioning as a dandy and a foreigner, and his attempt to find a niche for himself in Paris while still maintaining a foothold in the Italian avant-garde. Gino Severini’s unique posturing within the culture of Bohemian Paris and the rich visual record that he left behind provide a perfect platform from which to deepen our understanding of the multitude of factors influencing the Parisian avant-garde and its subsequent impact on avant-gardes throughout the rest of the Western world.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Toni for all her loving support and patience.
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The Italian Futurist Gino Severini begins his 1964 autobiography by proclaiming that “the two cities to which I am most deeply attached are Cortona and Paris: by birth to the first, intellectually and spiritually to the second.”¹ This statement, although written near the end of Severini’s life, describes the dual allegiances that in many ways defined and shaped the artist’s unique position throughout his Futurist years. While he was nominally a member of F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist movement and exhibited with the group throughout Europe, Severini lived in Paris and interacted with Marinetti and his colleagues primarily through written correspondence, while maintaining a physical presence in the world of the Parisian avant-garde. As a result, his work was not only a product of Futurist precepts but also stands as testimony to his immersion in the world of Parisian popular culture, particularly the dance-halls and theaters of bohemian Montmartre. In order to blend into and navigate the two worlds of which he was a part, Severini cultivated a specific identity for himself as a dandified male artist and a participant in the hottest trends of the day. Thus Gino Severini the Italian Futurist is inseparable from the Gino Severini we find in Paris – a city that was at the forefront of *la vie moderne*.

Although the body of literature on Futurist art has expanded in recent years, Severini is generally regarded in these studies as an important yet peripheral member of

Marinetti’s movement. Two notable exceptions, Anne Coffin Hanson’s book *Severini futurista*, published in conjunction with a show at Yale University Gallery of Art in 1996, and a collection of essays entitled *Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916* compiled by Daniela Fonti on the occasion of an exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in 2001, deal specifically with Severini’s Futurist involvement. While Fonti’s catalogue, in particular, is an important contribution to our understanding of the world of dance and entertainment that surrounded Severini, neither she nor Hanson systematically discuss the artist’s complicated positioning as a foreigner within French society and his individual relationship to Montmartre’s avant-garde and Parisian popular culture.

This dissertation addresses the gaps in Fonti and Hanson’s research on Severini in order to more fully understand the artist’s maneuvering within Parisian society. As an Italian artist hoping to make an impact in the complex world of Montmartre Severini was acutely aware of how his every action would be interpreted by fellow artists and bohemians. In order to gain insight into Severini’s world this dissertation will look at the locales and types of activities that Severini engaged in after his relocation to the French capital in 1906. Paris, and specifically Montmartre, offered a multitude of attractions for people from all walks of life and was particularly inviting to aspiring artists and performers. I will also draw on scholarship dealing with bohemia and dandyism as a way to theoretically position Severini’s self-fashioning. Finally, I will look at specific examples of Severini’s work, demonstrating how his infatuation with the dancing figure

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2 Here I deal primarily with English language works (although Fonti’s catalogue is a translation). The situation in Italian academia is not as dire. Scholars such as Piero Pacini and Ester Coen have written specifically on Severini, but I find their scholarship to be largely unreliable and simplistic.

echoed and reinforced cultural assumptions that aided him in developing his persona as an artist.

It was not until after World War II that Futurism began to carve a reputation for itself in international art circles, particularly in America. As Anne Coffin Hanson points out, this was partially a result of the Futurist movement’s failure to accept an invitation from the American painter Walter Pach (then living in Paris) to take part in the seminal Armory show that took place in New York from February to March in 1913.\(^4\) However, there was also a general desire on the part of the Allied countries to separate themselves from anything that could be connected with Fascism—and in the years after the war, Futurism certainly was. For example, in the catalogue of *Cubism and Abstract Art* from the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (the first showing of Futurist works at a major American museum) Alfred H. Barr Jr. refers to Futurism as politically “proto-Fascist, philosophically Bergsonian, ethically Nietzschean:” not exactly high praise given the general atmosphere of the day. Barr ends his short (ten pages including images) chapter on Futurism by saying that ‘although the artistic value of the Futurist movement is debatable, its influence upon European art of the following decades was second only to that of Cubism…’ Although this statement admits that Futurism did in fact have artistic reverberations (even if not ‘value’) this fact is undermined both here and in Barr’s

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\(^4\) Walter Pach extended an invitation to Severini to take part in the Armory Show in November of 1912. Since all the Futurist artists had agreed to make exhibition and publication decisions as a whole (at least initially), this invitation was immediately sent to Milan—to the “governo centrale.” The reasons for the group’s failure to accept the invitation are complicated but have much to do with Marinetti wanting to maintain full control over their exhibition schedule and also to supervise the display (i.e. to make sure that all works were placed in a separate room devoted solely to Futurism). In the end, Severini and most of his fellow artists believed that the Armory Show was an opportunity lost and that even with their showing at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915, Futurism was never able to capture the attention of the American public, which insisted on linking their work with that of the Cubists and other European avant-garde movements. Anne Coffin Hanson, *Severini futurista, 1912-1917* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1995), 11-12.
famous chart of modern art by the better-known Cubist movement (fig. i-1). In this chart Cubism is shown as a central nexus point in the development of the avant-garde, both influencing and being influenced by a number of other movements. Futurism on the other hand, is seen only to influence one movement: Dada and Abstract Art. As I demonstrate in the following pages, this could not be further from the truth. Futurism not only had a give and take relationship with Cubism, but it affected many art movements that followed it, such as Constructivism and Suprematism (both of which came out of Russian Cubo-Futurism), Orphism and Surrealism, among others.

The first major exhibition in the United States to be devoted to Futurism as an autonomous art movement also took place at the Museum of Modern Art, but nearly thirty years later, in 1961. Joshua C. Taylor’s catalogue is the first English publication to discuss the Futurist movement in a comprehensive way, often discussing details such as Marinetti’s other potential names for the movement—‘Electricism’ and ‘Dynamism’—and providing information on two original adherents to the manifesto, Aroldo Bonzagni and Romolo Romani (both of whom withdrew soon after the manifesto’s publication) that has been largely ignored or considered trite by more recent literature. While he by and large chalks up the movement’s enthusiasm and dynamism to the youthful naïveté of its members, Taylor’s final analysis is positive and he finishes the book by saying that the excitement Futurism generated throughout the world “whether expressed in anger, scorn, or open emulation, left a positive mark on almost every phase of modern art to follow.”


Taylor’s exhibition and catalogue initially had very little competition in terms of scholarship on Futurism. Although several articles on Marinetti and his movement were published during World War II, such as Vittorio Ceroni’s “When Future Met Its Past (The ‘Futurism’ of Filippo T. Marinetti),” these tended to be little more than propaganda pieces against Futurism. For example, Ceroni writes that “I am a severe critic of Futurism, not because I was a partner and have been disappointed; not because I was a prejudiced adversary and enjoy its failure, but as an objective witness I did not find in its development any worth-while experiment.” Although the author attempts to conceal his contempt for Futurism behind a mask of rational connoisseurship, it is obvious that he was influenced in his reading by the movement’s widely unchallenged allegiance to Italian Fascism.

The first (mostly) unbiased study of Futurism came about in 1942 in the form of Rosa Trillo Clough’s analysis of literary Futurism entitled Looking Back at Futurism. This groundbreaking study, however, for the most part ignored the artistic production of the movement, even when it was republished with additional material in 1961 under the title Futurism: The Story of a Modern Art Movement. Although it is easy to critique Clough’s study based on its many misconceptions, we must remember that her study had very little to draw on by way of previous scholarship and had the dubious distinction of standing nearly alone in its field. My one serious caveat with the work is that instead of creating a history of the movement by examining its various phases, Clough prefers to

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7 Ibid., 118.


discuss the movement and its literary theory as a singular entity that arrived fully formed and changed little throughout its nearly thirty years of existence—a theory that we now know to be far from the truth.

In 1959 the Venice Biennale put on an exhibit of Futurist art. This major retrospective coincided with the publication (in Italian) of two major volumes of Futurist documents collected from various archives, the Archivi del Futurismo, volume 1 from 1958 and volume 2 from 1962. Although these volumes tend more toward collection and less toward analysis they have greatly facilitated the work of all Futurist scholars who followed and remain crucial to the discipline. It is only recently, in commemoration of the 2009 centennial of the Futurist movement, that anything that could be considered a follow-up to the Archivi has been attempted. Although many catalogues were produced for the plethora of Futurist exhibitions held during this year, the catalogue produced by the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (MART) is unique in pulling together letters and sources from not only Futurism’s founding members, but also from members of other avant-garde movements, thus doing much to point out webs of connection throughout Europe and even America. As such this is not so much an exhibition catalogue as a volume made specifically for scholars of Futurism. Although it

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10 See La Biennale di Venezia (special issue on Futurism), 9, no. 36-37 (July-December 1959). This exhibit included the curatorial participation of several living former Futurist artists, including Gino Severini, and as such is unique among Futurist retrospectives. However, this also problematized the exhibit in that the artists involved had the dual projects of both highlighting their importance to what was now seen as an important avant-garde Italian movement and also separating themselves from any problematic political allusions the movement had picked up during the two World Wars. For an artist like Severini this was particularly important as his life and work after World War I had been devoted to the creation of a neo-Catholic mode of representation.


does attempt some analysis of the movement in relation to the European avant-garde as a whole, its main contribution comes from the letters and documents included in the volume, many of which have never been transcribed before.

The publication of the *Archivi del Futurismo* made it possible to take scholarship on Futurism to an entirely new level. Marianne W. Martin’s *Futurist Art and Theory: 1909-1915* from 1968 was, after Taylor’s, the most complete scholarly exploration of Futurism and has largely influenced many later works on Futurism. The volume is generally a formalist exploration of Futurist work, but despite its outdated nature and many errors it is admirable for its scope and depth. Anne d’Harnoncourt followed up this effort by organizing a 1980 exhibition entitled *Futurism and the International Avant-Garde* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This was the first time that the Futurists’ interactions with other avant-garde movements had been specifically addressed.

Marianne Martin again made her mark on the world of Futurism studies by co-editing with Anne Coffin Hanson a special issue of *Art Journal* devoted to Futurism that published articles originally written for a symposium on the occasion of d’Harnoncourt’s exhibition. This included the first English language study devoted entirely to Severini in the form of an article by Martin entitled “Carissimo Marinetti: Letters from Severini to the Futurist Chief.” This article was the first attempt to truly analyze the relationship

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14 Anne d’Harnoncourt, *Futurism and the International Avant-garde* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1980). This exhibition was influenced in part by the 1977 acquisition of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University of the Filippo Tommaso Marinetti archive.


between Severini and Marinetti and to make a case for Severini’s prominence in the Futurist movement.

Since this groundbreaking issue of *Art Journal* was published, English language scholarship on Futurism has taken off. The movement gained notoriety as scholars in art history and related topics began to take the cultural production of Futurism more seriously. Although it is impossible to fully cover every piece of scholarship that has come about in the last thirty years I want to highlight several of the most influential on my own work in order to position my work within the extant literature. My scholarship is primarily informed by the work of those who have endeavored to look at Futurism through a variety of different lenses. What unites such research is a point of view that does not valorize modernism as an autonomous realm of cultural activity, or limit the study of modernism to subjects and objects already accepted into the canon of high art. Instead, such scholarship paints a more flexible and inclusive picture of culture that gives equal attention to both high culture and popular forms of expression.

Anne Coffin Hanson continued to make great strides in the field until her death in 2004, publishing several exhibition catalogues that showcased Yale University’s superb Futurist collection combined with first-rate research. These included *The Futurist Imagination* and *Severini futurista* (previously discussed), in which all the letters Severini wrote to Marinetti were republished and translated.17 One of the most important art historians currently working on Futurism is Christine Poggi, and her work has particularly informed my research.18 In her 2008 study *Inventing Futurism: The Art and

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17 Anne Coffin Hanson, *The Futurist Imagination* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1983) and Anne Coffin Hanson, *Severini futurista: 1912-1917* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1995).
Politics of Artificial Optimism the author discusses Severini extensively in her sixth chapter entitled “Futurist Love, Luxury, and Lust”. Although Poggi does not delve deeply into the artist’s self-fashioning as a bohemian or the implications of that persona for his art, this section has served as a model and guide for me in the writing of several of my own chapters. Daniela Fonti’s exhibition catalogue, Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916, (also previously mentioned) has likewise been a huge inspiration for me.\textsuperscript{19} Although the essays that make up this catalogue focus on Severini’s involvement with the world of Parisian dance, both popular and avant-garde, as short explorations for the purpose of an exhibition they merely scratch the surface of a much larger and more complicated topic that I explore in my dissertation. The questions that these essays pose and the avenues of research that they open up were, however, of invaluable use to me when I was first formulating my research questions and strategies.

Not many scholars have delved specifically into the relationship between Futurism and Cubism, a major focus in my dissertation. The first to undertake this task was Ardegno Soffici, an artist and theorist intimately involved in avant-garde circles in both Paris and Italy.\textsuperscript{20} There was no scholarly follow-up to Soffici’s period account until Max Kozloff’s study of 1973.\textsuperscript{21} Although Kozloff’s book systematically treats the subject


\textsuperscript{20} Ardegno Soffici, Cubismo e futurismo (Florence, 1914).

\textsuperscript{21} Max Kozloff, Cubism/Futurism (New York: Charterhouse, 1973).
of Cubism and Futurism’s relationship to one another, it is unfortunately very superficial and does not delve into the deeper lines of attraction and transference between the two groups. Kozloff’s work is also unabashedly pro-Cubism and promotes the French movement as the primary maker and disseminator of ideas and technique, a viewpoint that I try to nuance in the following pages.

It is impossible to discuss Futurism without addressing the issue of politics. As the politics of Futurism is a fairly controversial subject it has been treated in several ways. The first was stated by Joshua Taylor in his monograph for the exhibition of Futurist painting and sculpture in 1961, in which he cautions the viewer that “the nature of the Futurist impulse in politics… should not influence the assessment of its achievement in art.”

Likewise in a 1986 catalogue accompanying a prominent exhibition of Futurism at the Palazzo Grassi curator Pontus Hulten omitted any direct comment on the role of the Italian Futurists in political events of the period in favor of establishing the international scope of Futurist innovations and influence in the history of modern art. Although this denial of political Futurism has now been overturned, it continues to persist in some interesting ways. For example, the major exhibition in Milan staged for the 2009 Futurist centennial also refuses to comment on Futurism’s role in politics even though it aims to give a complete picture of Futurism, from its Symbolist and Divisionist origins through to the movement’s death on the eve of the Second World War. A second strategy used to navigate Futurism’s problematic political heritage has

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22 Taylor, 17.

been to displace the significance of the political dimension of original Futurist thought by relegating it to a later, less aesthetically important phase of the movement. This strategy is obvious in Marjorie Perloff’s study, *The Futurist Moment*, where she explicitly locates the movement’s political affiliations and activities to its post-1920 phase.25

A much more promising avenue of research has been taken by scholars such as Günter Berghaus, Mark Antliff, and George Mosse, to give some of the most prominent examples.26 These authors, while they do connect Futurist politics to the Fascist genealogy, take great care to separate the two lines of thought, exploring the origins of Futurism’s political beliefs and tracing each member’s ideology to their pre-Futurist days. The movement’s political beliefs were certainly not synonymous with Fascism, there is no doubt that certain aspects of Futurist rhetoric and aesthetic were folded into the myth of Fascism. Futurism not only articulated content similar to later Fascist ideology—nationalism, militarism, the cult of irrational violence and aestheticization of violence—but developed important forms in their performances and demeanor that formed the basis for later Fascist methods of crowd provocation and control.


I have thus far not mentioned many works of scholarship in the Italian language except for the *Archivi Futuristi* and its follow-up at the MART archives. This is not because works in the Futurist’s native language do not exist but because they are largely unreliable in terms of their scope and methods. However, there are a few notable exceptions to an otherwise frustrating field where familial connections often count for more than a good citation or an unbiased opinion. Daniela Fonti’s publications are among the best and have already been discussed. Ester Coen has been very present on the Italian scene, and although she has not written purely academic studies of Futurism, she is responsible for curating a great many constructive exhibitions and catalogues. Claudio Fogu and Emilio Gentile have written extensively and well about the politics of both Futurism and Fascism. Alessandro Del Puppo also became a major player in Futurist studies when he published his valuable work on the journal *Lacerba* in 2000. Finally, Giovanni Lista, while his work has not always been groundbreaking or carefully researched, has been particularly prolific on the topic of Futurism in Italian, French and

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27 Italian works on Futurism, in fact, exist in large numbers. These fall primarily into one of three categories: general descriptions of the movement usually authored by someone who had a personal relationship with Futurism; exhibitions and accompanying exhibitions focusing on Futurist activity in some minor (in the Futurist sense) location in Italy; and collections of primary materials from an artist’s family archive. Although the first two have been of very little use in my research the third has been invaluable.


29 Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Emilio Gentile, “Il futurismo e la politica: Dal nazionalismo modernista al fascismo (1909-1920),” in *Futurismo, cultura e politica*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1988). Note: even though both of the English translations mentioned have titles that refer particularly to Fascism, both books contain a great wealth of information on Futurism and how the avant-garde movement affected cultural politics in Italy.

even occasionally English. The other true benefit that has come from Italian scholars is their many publications of correspondence and other primary materials, often from the artist’s personal archive. Zeno Birolli has published the majority of Umberto Boccioni’s surviving materials. Massimo Carrà has collected his father’s papers. And Umbro Apollonio has done much to collect and analyze the Futurist manifestos.

My own analysis of Futurism in this dissertation departs from the majority of the works discussed above by placing popular culture and the social basis for art at the forefront. Although I do discuss the Futurists’ forays into politics and make extensive use of visual analyses to explore Severini’s work in-depth, the focus of my dissertation remains firmly rooted in the social and cultural drama that took place on the ground in both Italy and France. It is my understanding that art and culture are always connected with, but not reducible to, economic, ideological, and political factors. Thus, the following analysis attempts to elucidate the critical links and disjunctures between cultural forms and modes of representation and the prevailing web of communal relations in order to understand better the intricate network of institutions, processes, and discourses in the social construction of meaning.


In my first chapter, I reconceptualize Futurism in terms of the concept of artistic bohemia that existed in France and has so far only been speculated on by historians such as Mary Gluck, Jerrold Seigel, and Peter Brooker. While art historians such as Marilyn Brown and Richard Thomson have considered the work of such prominent French artists as Edouard Manet and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in light of notions of bohemia, art historians have yet to fully consider the relevance of this concept for the period after 1900, which witnessed the birth of a variety of avant-garde movements including Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism.35 This is the time period in which older assumptions from the heyday of bohemia in the nineteenth century begin to break down and bohemia begins to be packaged and put on commercial display. As such there is a lacuna in the literature regarding this particular time period. My first chapter aims to fill this void.

Chapter two deals with Severini’s early career in Rome and his first years in Paris. As already stated, Severini moved to Paris in 1906 and joined the Futurist movement in late 1909 from afar. By reconstructing his artistic and cultural influences during the years before he joined Futurism, I shed light on the state of the Parisian avant-garde and also Severini’s initial influences and connections in Paris. These include Neo-Impressionism (Severini’s stated reason for moving to Paris), Symbolism and Neo-Symbolism (largely literary and theatrical), as well as Unanimist and Bergsonian thought. I also briefly discuss the ways in which the Italian artist negotiated his foreign status and used the archetypal figure of a dandy in order to find a niche for himself in what was a new and difficult culture.

In chapter 3 I focus on Severini’s images of dance-halls, dancers and the environs of Montmartre. Although this is the subject of Daniela Fonti’s 2001 catalogue, my focus on the paintings and their meaning for Severini is altogether different and aims to show the liminal world of the dance-halls for what they were: the quintessential bohemian subject. I frame this chapter with discussions of both ‘high’ (or avant-garde) dance, such as that created by Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller and the ‘low’ (popular) dances imported from the Americas, such as the Argentine tango, the African-American animal dances, and the ‘home-grown’ forms of the chahut (or cha-cha) that were performed in the dance-halls. While there is plenty of proof that Severini immersed himself in dance-hall culture, not much remains to connect him with the work of Fuller and Duncan. However, through a careful analysis of Severini’s work and other unpublished documents from Paris and Italy, I will demonstrate that Duncan’s dance techniques and Fuller’s electric techtronics had a significant impact on the aspiring painter and dancer.

Chapter 4 turns to the relationship between avant-garde movements in France and Italy and how, despite popular thought, the channels of influence ran both ways. Futurism was not, in fact, an Italian offshoot of Cubism, but rather an independent movement that worked tirelessly to forge its own connections with members of the international avant-garde. This chapter tracks Gino Severini’s early association with Futurism and posits several reasons for him to join such an incendiary movement from afar. It then discusses in more depth Futurism’s maneuverings with contemporaneous movements including Cubism and Orphism. It often fell to Severini to settle disputes between the French and Italian avant-gardes, making him a peacekeeper and go-between. The chapter ends with a
discussion of Severini’s rocky relationship with the Futurist chief, F.T. Marinetti, and his eventual turn away from the movement in the years around World War I.

My fifth and final chapter aims to pull together all the threads of Severini’s life and follow his career through his Futurist days. This is not meant to be an exhaustive exploration of Severini’s image of the dance and his stylistic development over the years, a task that has already admirably been done by Daniela Fonti and Ann Coffin Hanson, rather this chapter analyzes Severini’s development of an artist’s persona from the standpoint of his self-portraits. In general Severini produced one self-portrait a year and much can be gleaned from the different styles, the inscriptions, and the situations of his life that brought the self-portrait to fruition. I uncover Severini’s idea of himself, or his self-fashioning, through these paintings and also through other paintings, sketches, and portraits that correspond to the self-portrait. This chapter is the only one that stretches from Severini’s early days in Rome through to his eventual disillusionment with Futurism.

The final conclusion to my dissertation aims to bring forth the unique discoveries that I have made throughout my time researching and writing about the figure of Gino Severini and his interactions with the European avant-garde. In the process of highlighting these discoveries I show the artist’s constant posturing and changing allegiances as a conscious project to negotiate his identity as a foreign artist in the avant-garde capital of Paris. I also briefly discuss Severini’s life after World War I—particularly his ‘return to order’ and reconversion to Catholicism—as an extension of this project. While the drastic changes in his lifestyle, artistic aesthetic, and self-image after the war seem incongruous when compared to his Futurist years, they too were part of the
artist’s overarching endeavor to intertwine his own destiny with that of Paris and the transnational avant-garde.
CHAPTER 1

Bohemia, Outsiders, and the Avant-Garde

Paris – How many friends and colleagues of mine came to that city, paused as if in front of a closed door, and discouraged, disgusted, turned around and left. Back in the provinces, they made all sorts of remarks, although well aware of actually knowing next to nothing about it, not having seen or understood anything at all. Their excuse was the fact that Paris is, like all beautiful things, very beautiful things, difficult to conquer; the conquest must be deserved, and to deserve it, it is necessary to give oneself to it, no holds barred.¹

Gino Severini left Italy for Paris in October of 1906 at the age of 23 with no money, little knowledge of the French language, and no clear concept of the direction that his life would take.² On the surface the young artist seemed no different from countless other foreigners who had left their homelands to find inspiration and excitement in the flourishing artistic environment of Paris; he was young, poor, inexperienced, and unswervingly determined to make an international name for himself through his art. However, unlike so many Italians who journeyed to the French capital, Severini did not give in to the doubt, frustration, or failure he encountered in that foreign city. Instead, he persevered in the face of difficulty and worked tirelessly to create a new life for himself there.

When Severini left Italy, he left behind his home, his connections, and his culture, yet he wasted no time in finding a community in Paris. His initial friends and colleagues


² Severini writes in his autobiography that his first job in Rome at the age of 15 required him to occasionally write short letters in French. Thus, he must have had some prior schooling in the language: Severini, Life of a Painter, 9.
in that city were primarily fellow Italian expatriates with whom he could communicate and reminisce about his homeland, but many of these early companions eventually drifted back to Italy or set off on new adventures. As his Italian connections declined, Severini found himself propelled into the inner circle of the artistic community centered in Paris’ most controversial and scandalous arrondissement, Montmartre. These artists, writers, and thinkers lived a bohemian and distinctly French lifestyle that exerted a powerful influence on the life and imagination of the young Italian.

This chapter considers the way in which Severini adapted to French bohemian society through an examination of Severini’s move to Paris and his formative years there (1906-1909). These were years when he had minimal contact with the Italian avant-garde (he joined Futurism in late 1909) and was fully immersed in the exciting new developments emerging in the French capital. The relationships that he formed in Paris and the locales that he frequented played an integral part in his development and thus must be carefully analyzed in order to understand Severini’s later artistic production. There has been a marked lack of discussion in existing scholarship about the impact of notions of bohemia on Severini’s artistic formation. Oddly missing, also, is an

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3 Severini gives the name of several of these friends; including Gino Calza-Bini and his brother Alberto, Gino Baldo, Anselmo Bucci, and Amedeo Modigliani (Severini, Life of a Painter, 26 and 34).

4 Throughout this text I have chosen to use the term ‘bohemia’ with a lower-case ‘b’ even though many previous scholars of bohemia have capitalized the word and its derivatives. It is my opinion that capitalizing ‘Bohemia’ leads to confusion between definitions (ie. metaphorical bohemia vs. the true geographical Bohemia) and also gives the impression that bohemia is a well-defined, bordered place when it is instead a slippery cultural construct.

5 The following recent studies of Futurism and Severini that have either not acknowledged his connection to bohemian culture or have treated it (and the artist himself) superficially: Gunter Berghaus, Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944 (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), Marjorie Perloff, The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), and Christine Poggi, In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992). Books by Anne
examination of the historiographical literature on the subject of bohemia itself and its relationship to Parisian culture between the turn of the century and World War I. Despite extensive scholarship on bohemia and its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century, the problems and inconsistencies associated with bohemia after the turn of the century remain largely ignored by scholars. The theories and definitions that work so well for the early years of the bohemian phenomenon begin to break down at this point. Boundaries are blurred as the forces of modernity and commodity culture changed the urban landscape.

By using Severini’s life and works as a case study I will reconsider how paradigmatic conceptions of bohemia functioned (and changed) in Paris in the years before World War I and how these intersected with avant-garde trends. The concept of bohemia and its continuously changing nature at the turn of the century operated as an inspiration and unifying force in the lives and imaginations of members of the avant-garde. I specifically argue that the concept of bohemia (as well as the related figure of the dandy) became increasingly commercialized during these years, a phenomenon that had a direct impact on the mediating role of artistic production in the realm of popular culture.6 The shifting notions of modernity and commercialism that informed this change were


6 The OED defines a dandy as “One who studies above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably; a beau, fop, ‘exquisite.’” This figure, as I will explore in more detail in Chapter 5, is far from being outside the realm of bohemia and actually exists within it, sharing bohemia’s dislike for the bourgeoisie and conventional lifestyles. "dandy, n." Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series. 1997. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 35 January 2008 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50057450>. 
symptomatic of the wider tensions and conflicts of a society in transition and impacted many important aspects of Severini’s artistic and personal life. Under these constantly evolving circumstances foreign artists such as Severini found bohemia to be an inroad into the burgeoning community of avant-garde artists at the fringes of respectable Parisian society.

The world Severini entered upon arrival in Paris on a “grey, rainy Sunday morning in October 1906” was unlike anything the young artist had experienced before.7 While Italy was by no means backward, it did lag behind France in its transition from an agricultural, family-based economy to one centered on industry and big business. Italy had come late to nationhood, not completing the unification process until the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871.8 Despite its political unification, Italy was still very much a disjointed nation. Antonio Gramsci famously described Italy during these years as a place with three distinct cultures: an advanced proletariat concentrated in the northwest of the country, a large and ideologically backward peasantry in the south, and petty-bourgeois intellectuals with no unified project in the center.9 Furthermore there was a large sense of regional loyalty exacerbated by the lack of a true national language.10 Therefore, although

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8 Technically this process continued through the end of World War II when the last *città irrideente* joined the nation. During the fallout from the World War I, Italy (temporarily in some cases) annexed Trieste, Gorizia, Istria and Zara, as well as Spalato (Split), Cattaro (Kotor), most of coastal Dalmatia, Corsica (Corse) and Nizza (Nice).


10 Standard Italian, although implemented during the 1871 unification, did not truly become popularized until after the advent of television in the 1960s.
Severini came from a nation that was politically unified, in the years before the turn of
the century Italy did not yet have a strong sense of a singular Italian identity to compete
with that of ‘Frenchness’ found in Paris.

The Italian nation remained fragmented, but its residents did feel a powerful
regional connection left over from the period before unification. Thus, Severini identifies
himself first and foremost with his birthplace, Cortona, and its region, Tuscany. The
opening paragraphs of his autobiography describe how deeply he felt this attachment,
touting Cortona’s distinguished history (Etruscan in origin) and its famous inhabitants
throughout the ages (including Luca Signorelli, Pietro da Cortona, and Saint Margaret).
He writes that he felt “shades of that same toughness and independent spirit and a bit of
that vital juice, that sap, running through my veins.”\(^{11}\) Later in his autobiography he
detects in his father (and by extension himself) the marks of a true Cortonese spirit:
independence and a tendency towards extremes and exaggerations.\(^{12}\) However, while
Severini is proud of his heritage, he also finds it debilitating in terms of his artistic
development and writes that the first works that he completed in Paris “bore traces of that
Italian provincial view from which Italians staying on their native soil hardly ever
manage to entirely divest themselves.”\(^{13}\) It was only after he had spent considerable time
outside of Italy that he was able to break free from its influence and produce truly
innovative works.

\(^{11}\) Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 3.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 39.
The situation in France was far from utopian, however. The Third Republic, lasting from 1870 until 1940 when it was succeeded by the Vichy Regime, was marked by both unrivaled economic prosperity and a strong sense of social unease. Thus a sense of general unrest went hand in hand with a preoccupation with personal advancement and unbridled pleasure. As Roger Shattuck writes, it was a period of “pompous display, frivolity, hypocrisy, cultivated taste, and relaxed morals;” all terms that have also been used to describe the bohemian lifestyle.\textsuperscript{14}

Shattuck goes on to tie this sentiment to the new directions being explored in the arts. He writes that while the avant-garde only fully came into its own during the first years of the twentieth century, the era of artistic innovation in Paris truly began in the 1880s. He calls this time period the ‘Banquet Years’ or more commonly \textit{la belle époque}, and describes it as “the thirty years of peace, prosperity, and internal dissension which lie across 1900.”\textsuperscript{15} The energy and exuberance of first the Latin Quarter, then Montmartre, and finally Montparnasse provided a colorful background for these years, and the innovations taking place in studios, cabarets, and cafés all over the city represented a new and exciting aesthetic. During this time emerging artistic forms became integrated with daily life to an extent not seen previously. With regard to Severini such integration occurred in the context of an emerging bohemian subculture, which served to define life in his adopted home, Montmartre.

\textsuperscript{14} Roger Shattuck, \textit{The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918} (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1958), 3. While Italy did not experience the same cultural, economic, and political excitement so visible in Paris, it too saw its share of innovation. While scholars have tried to claim these changes as distinctly Italian it is generally recognized that Italy largely looked to France to lead the way into the new century. Francesca Cagianelli and Dario Matteoni, eds. \textit{La Belle Époque in Italia: Arte in Italia 1880-1915}, exhibition catalogue from Rovigo, palazzo Roverella (Silvana Editoriale, 2008).

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
I. Bohemia: Theories and Origins

**Bohemian** - A gipsy [sic] of society; one who either cuts himself off, or is by his habits cut off, from society for which he is otherwise fitted; especially an artist, literary man, or actor, who leads a free, vagabond, or irregular life, not being particular as to the society he frequents, and despising conventionalities generally. (Used with considerable latitude, with or without reference to morals.)\(^{16}\)

Although historians often treat the realms of bourgeois popular culture and artistic bohemia separately, I argue that they were programmatically merged in Gino Severini’s life and artistic vision. As historian Jerrold Seigel argues, although bourgeois and bohemian lifestyles were diametrically opposed in the popular imagination, their paths often crossed in everyday life, and their social identities were integrally linked.\(^{17}\)

Whereas the conservative bourgeoisie routinely embraced the classical norms and institutions of the old monarchical and imperial order, their more progressive counterparts were open to artistic innovation as a sign of their liberal or radical allegiance to the lower classes. Since bohemian artists broke with artistic and social conventions and were also marginalized through their outright poverty, they inhabited a shadow world between the working poor and the rising middle classes. In practice bohemia always had a troubling allure for the bourgeoisie by virtue of its transgressive and populist associations, just as the cultured and moneyed world of the bourgeois had a mixed appeal for the downtrodden bohemian. Although the term “bohemia” included a wide-spectrum of social types (and is thus extremely difficult to define), its avant-garde members all shared a refusal or inability to adopt a stable social identity that would define them unequivocally as working class or bourgeois. Their very existence as artists and writers on the margins was symptomatic of tensions and conflicts that characterized a society in

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transition, and also pointed to the instability of cultural codes that had once served to define a strict class hierarchy.

The term ‘bohemia’ was originally used to describe Europe’s itinerant gypsies (mistakenly thought to have originated in the Czech province of Bohemia) whose status as poor street musicians and performers endeared them to early avant-garde artists such as Edouard Manet. By Severini’s era, definitions had expanded to include struggling artists, disaffected youth, the underworld, as well as any life-style modeled on the gypsy’s transient and seemingly unfettered existence. The designation ‘bohemian’ located its inhabitants within an amorphous space between ingenuity and criminality, antithetical to the class-based codes of propriety upheld by the bourgeoisie. In short, proponents of bohemianism continually sought to rewrite the aesthetic connection between art and life. Having initially tried to heal the fragmentation of modernity through aesthetics, bohemians invariably ended up embracing this same fragmentation as an integral part of their own identity.

The advent of the industrial revolution dealt a very real blow to the artistic community in Paris: the loss of traditional forms of patronage for artists and writers. The rising need to sell one’s work on the open market instead of working with patrons brought about a fundamental shift in the arts. Individual creativity and innovation became a way to set oneself apart from the rest of the artistic pool. Consistency and conformity no longer held the same sway in a market that was changing with alarming speed. The artist was also suddenly in a position where he (or she) was a merchant trying to sell himself- or herself: the success and the financial value of one’s work was linked to an individual’s own self-fashioning as an “artist.” It was now the artist who was

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18 Seigel, 4.

fundamentally responsible for his or her own future and day-to-day survival.

As they lost their traditional ties of patronage (especially to the aristocracy) artists had to look for other ways to maintain self-respect in an increasingly alienating world. In the bohemian world, class standing hypothetically did not matter and this allowed the artist to maintain a degree of freedom from traditional societal structures. All the same, in place of traditional hierarchies there did develop a sort of caste system in bohemia that was largely determined by qualities such as artistic prestige and the ability to successfully publicize oneself. However, in theory there was no requirement in bohemia that members have any other common qualities except individualism. Thus self-declared bohemians welcomed everyone into the fold, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality or economic and social background. As a result, foreigners and immigrants often joined the realm of bohemia because it was accommodating to their difference, while most other social groups were exceedingly difficult to enter, at least initially. In some ways this gave the bohemian community an intrinsic instability, as one of its uses was as a transitional phase for those who desired more stable social identities but did not yet have the standing for vertical socio-economic and cultural movement. Bohemia also attracted members of the upper classes wishing to temporarily escape from the confines of a bourgeois life. As its early theorists claimed, bohemia was never composed of a fixed demographic but instead remained nebulous and hard to define.

The writer Henry Mürger is generally credited with the first theorization of the term bohemia in its nonliteral (social) form. His novel, _Scènes de la Vie de Bohème_ from 1849, was wildly popular and has inspired many variations over the years, including

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20 In reality, the concept of ‘individualism’ so important to the artistic avant-garde and bohemia was made up of a series of manufactured and self-designed personas that were crafted to fit into the bohemians’ constant desire to be free from the sometimes imagined shackles of the bourgeoisie. As I argue in the rest of my dissertation, Gino Severini did just this—he carefully created and exhibited a version of himself that was in keeping with bohemian norms.
Giacomo Puccini’s 1896 opera, La bohème. Mürgér’s original goal was to distance himself and his fellow bohemians from true gypsies and their questionable reputations, emphasizing in his preface to Scènes de la Vie de Bohème that:

“the Bohemians described in this book have nothing in common with the Bohemians of boulevard playwrights, who have used the word as a synonym for pickpocket and murderer; nor are they recruited from the ranks of bear-leaders, sword-eaters, vendors of key-rings, inventors of ‘infallible systems,’ stock-brokers of doubtful antecedents and the followers of the thousand and one vague and mysterious callings in which the principle [sic] occupation is to have none whatever and to be ready at any time to do anything save that which is right.”

Despite Mürgér’s best intentions, however, bohemians and gypsies continued to be perceived by their contemporaries as sharing some fundamental characteristics: a vagabond lifestyle, and a disregard of money, material possessions, and conventional bourgeois morality.

From Mürgér’s perspective bohemia was removed from this violent and empty life and was instead connected to the more noble pursuit of ‘Art’ (by which he means primarily literary fiction and poetry). He writes that for most members “bohemia is a stage of the artist’s career; it is the preface to the Academy, the Hospital or the Morgue.” Thus, for Mürgér there were three primary kinds of bohemians: the unknown dreamers, or those amateur artists who disdained self-promotion under the delusion that

21 Mürgér’s Scènes de la Vie de Bohême first appeared in the journal Le Corsaire-Satan between 1845 and 1849 as a series of vignettes about artistic life in the Latin Quarter.

22 More recent productions based on its premise were the 1996 musical Rent by Jonathan Larson and the 2001 film Moulin Rouge directed by Baz Luhrmann. The film Moulin Rouge is especially interesting as it takes up the mantle of early twentieth century music-hall acts in providing its audience with a non-linear accumulation of references to popular culture that will be discussed in chapter 2.

23 Henry Mürgér, The Latin Quarter (Scènes de la Vie de Bohème), translated by Ellen Marriague and John Selwyn (London: Greening, 1900), xiv.

24 Ibid., xxi. The concepts of the “Hospital” and the “Morgue” are used here to emphasize the danger and uncertainty of bohemian life: very literally the destination of many of those who took on the mantle of bohemia was sickness or death.
their genius would win them an audience and the professional success which had so far eluded them; the professional, who already had a steady income but chose to live in bohemia purely for the experience (this type generally returns to a bourgeois lifestyle after a short period of time); and the official bohemian, an artist of reputation who eventually ‘made it’ in the eyes of conventional society.

Mürger was not the only major figure to try to categorize the members of bohemia. The painter and illustrator Honoré Daumier created a series of twenty-eight images entitled “Les Bohémians de Paris” which were published in the journal Charivari between September 1840 and April 1842 (figs. 1-1 and 1-2). These images contain a wide variety of bohemian types that stretch from criminals to disaffected youth, making it clear that bohemia was not a clearly defined social space but an umbrella term for outsiders of all kinds. While Daumier’s depiction of bohemia is perhaps too broad by academic standards, it paints an accurate picture of the enormous impact that bohemian ideas had on society during its heyday in the 1840s.

Other contemporary authors offered their own definitions and perspectives. The realist novelist and playwright Honoré de Balzac used the term ‘bohemian’ in his 1830s text, A Prince of Bohemia, as a way to denote members of an alternative artistic community who possess a unique pride and code of honor. He writes that “Bohemia [note the capitalization] has nothing and lives upon what it has. Hope is its religion; faith (in oneself) its creed; and charity is supposed to be its budget. All these young men are greater than their misfortune; they are under the feet of Fortune, yet more than equal to Fate.”

To Balzac, the bohemians were the geniuses and leaders of the next generation and bohemia was their training ground.

Another popular way to define bohemia was to give it ‘physical’ borders and treat it like a separate, even if imaginary, place. For example, the journal La Silhouette,

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Journal des Caricatures states in 1849 that “Bohemia is a district in the Department of the Seine bordered on the north by cold, on the west by hunger, on the south by love, and on the east by hope.”26 Other such borders in contemporary accounts include poverty, illusion, the hospital, work and gaiety, necessity, and courage.27 This gave bohemia both the characteristics of a visible land with marked inhabitants and made it appear to be the stuff of dreamers and misfits—a duality that continues to haunt any account of bohemia. For example, contemporary historian Jerrold Seigel defines bohemia as “an identifiable country with visible inhabitants, but not one marked on any map.”28 The concept of bohemia continues to be extremely difficult to define and theorize as it is by nature urban, cosmopolitan, and transient. It means something different to each theorist depending on whether he or she considers herself part of its ranks, one of its defenders, or one of its critics. However, what comes through clearly in this cacophony is that in criticism and writings from the mid-nineteenth century onward bohemia was considered to be a very real phenomenon, even if its definition remained amorphous.

Most authors writing on bohemia treat the concept as a sociological subject. Many of these works, as well as many of the more recent studies, focus primarily on literary figures and trace the history of bohemia through its genealogy in literary texts. These histories either attempt to trace the origins and influence of literary bohemia from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century through its resurgence in American culture with the Beat Generation, or instead choose to focus on the more clearly delineated time period of the nineteenth century. As stated before, there are surprisingly few discussions of bohemia as it appeared in the years just before World War I, even though many authors allow that this was the time in which artistic (rather than literary) bohemia


27 Siegel, 3.

28 Ibid.
reached its pinnacle. Those who do discuss these years do so in an incomplete manner: for example, Jerrold Seigel, in his seminal study *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, touches on the subject in chapter 12 of his book, but limits his discussion to the literary figures who frequented Montmartre’s cafes and the ill-fated 1917 ballet Diaghilev *Parade*, a group effort by Pablo Picasso, Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau and others. Mary Gluck’s more recent book, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, devotes an entire section to modernist bohemia but frames it in terms of Primitivism. In particular, she discusses the primitivizing aesthetic of Gauguin as continuing the bohemian project but largely avoids an in-depth discussion of other types of bohemies (including urban types) coexisting during these years and their complicated web of interrelationships.

One of the earliest systematic attempts to connect the realm of the avant-garde to that of bohemia was an article written by George S. Snyderman and William Josephs in 1939 entitled ‘Bohemia: The Underworld of Art.’ This short paper gives a sociological perspective on the phenomenon of bohemia that reflects a negative reaction to the loose morals and carefree life of its members. It deserves a closer look both because it is one of the earliest self-proclaimed ‘scientific’ explorations of bohemia and for its fascinating and disturbing use of medical vocabulary to describe the phenomenon. Snyderman and Josephs attribute much of the nature of bohemia to ‘youthful irresponsibility’ and ‘childish pranks’. They speak of the ‘spirit of rebellion’ that always accompanied bohemian behavior and its ‘contagion’ spreading from France to other nations.

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31 I say ‘scientific’ because all the authors say about their methods is that “conclusions drawn in this article are the result of the study of several hundred cases.” Ibid., footnote 1., p. 187.

32 Ibid., 188.
then go on to say that the bohemians (whom they generally equate with the French Romantics) drew their inspiration from many sources, most of which were “spectacular figures whose weaknesses were the sort which inferior minds seize upon as the criteria of artistic behavior.” This was a common sentiment at the time: many outside of bohemia (and even many that lived within its mores) believed bohemia was a dangerous force with the ability to corrupt and disrupt organized society. It was therefore an infectious and powerful force at odds with the bourgeoisie. Finally Synderman and Josephs lay out a ‘scientific’ theory of the sociological development of bohemian groups as ‘parasites’ of already existing artistic groups. The authors effectively reduce the definition of a bohemian to any collected group of extreme individualists (defined as a dogmatic philosophy that aims at practical anarchy). They posit that bohemia has retained such a lasting allure and influence due to the concept of the ‘defective personality,’ which hampers the ability of the person in question to engage in normal social intercourse. These personality defects range from lack of motivation and physical ailments to severe ‘psychopathic’ diseases, many of whose symptoms have in fact been metaphorically and self-consciously co-opted by the bohemian/avant-garde community (see chapter 3).

Other writers on bohemia have brought their own views and their own preoccupations to bear on the subject. César Graña’s 1964 text, Bohemian Versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century, is mostly restricted to the period from 1830 to 1848 (with the last section dealing with contemporary views of bohemia’s heritage). He analyzes these years and the phenomenon of bohemia in terms of the economic and social forces at work in the field.

33 This comment Synderman and Josephs take from the previously published book by Thomas Craven entitled Bohemians of Paris (Harpers, 1933), 342.

34 Synderman and Josephs, 190.

of literature and the tension between these writers and society at large. Graña’s work is very similar to a much older treatise by Albert Cassagne from 1906 that likewise sees bohemia as a revolt against bourgeois commercial society. Neither author seems to be interested in exploring bohemian consciousness but focuses rather on the class conflicts that were supposedly responsible for a change in literary taste, patronage, and the market.

Malcolm’s Easton’s book, *Artists and Writers in Paris: The Bohemian Idea, 1803-1867*, also from 1964, purportedly widens this scope to include painters and sculptors. Ironically and somewhat oddly, however, the majority of these visual artists are fictional characters taken from major literary treatments of bohemia. Both groups, real and fictional, are given the same weight, ultimately making this text a narrow and unreliable exploration of the field of literature. At the end of his book Easton discusses the relationship of bohemia to the criminal underworld of Montmartre, but unlike the majority of more recent scholars, he concludes that there is no real connection between the two.

Helmut Kreuzer’s book, *Die Bohème, Beiträge zu ihrer Beschreibung*, from 1968, is the first to address bohemian culture during the 1960s and its similarities to past bohemian cultures. Although this topic is outside of the scope of my work, it is interesting to see how Kreuzer pushes the boundaries of what has been historically considered ‘Bohemia.’ He defines bohemia simply as a subculture of anti-bourgeois intellectuals in a modern industrial society. While this definition makes it easy to identify bohemian tendencies in a number of contexts, it also leaves Kreuzer little room to explore the complexities of the bohemian subculture and its unstable relationship with the middle...
classes.

James Miller’s *Bohemia: The Protoculture Then and Now* from 1978 is a rather superficial look at the roots of bohemia and its continuation into the present day.\(^{39}\) Miller defines the bohemian tendency as a spontaneous movement brought about by the inability of Western society to deal with major events and moral dilemmas during the period leading up to World War I. Again, bohemia is described as a one-sided response to bourgeois authority. Miller’s unscholarly style of writing also makes his book feel like a partisan defense of bohemia. In contrast, Joanna Richardson’s *The Bohemians: La vie de Bohème in Paris, 1830-1914* from 1971 is written from the equally invested but opposite perspective of a superior British upper-class woman that results in an unsympathetic and slightly arrogant text.\(^{40}\)

British bohemia has been the subject of several academic treatments. Virginia Nicholson’s recent *Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living, 1900-1939* focuses primarily on the Bloomsbury Group in England.\(^{41}\) Although this is a richly detailed exploration of the group’s rejection of bourgeois Victorian values, it is complicated by the fact that Virginia Nicholson is the granddaughter of Vanessa and Clive Bell, both members of the Bloomsbury Group. The book is wrought in anecdotes and admiration for the brave nonconformism of her ancestors, but Nicholson is too close to and too personally invested in this particular past to attain much critical distance. Peter Brooker,


in his recent book *Bohemia in London*, devotes the majority of his argument to the modernists and avant-garde artists and does so quite successfully.\(^4^2\) In this sense, Brooker’s book can be seen as a very useful model for its recognition of the paradoxes at the very heart of bohemia and its essential but unstated connection to the bourgeois world.

Another well-known author who also acknowledged bohemia’s paradoxes is T.J. Clark. His books, particularly *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, are among the most provocative attempts to investigate Parisian bohemian life.\(^4^3\) Clark is the first scholar to deal extensively with the inner connections between bohemia and the bourgeoisie, a topic that had previously been either ignored or denied. In Clark’s Marxist approach, bohemia can be divided into two parts: a genuine bohemia, whose members did not aspire to achieve a bourgeois lifestyle, and a false or sentimentalized bohemia, composed of figures who catered and pandered to the bourgeois imagination. This false bohemia was associated with Mürger’s romanticized view of bohemia while the true bohemia existed only in the hearts and minds of avant-garde artists and revolutionary thinkers. While Clark’s books do not explicitly take bohemia as their topic, they are insightful explorations of the social matrix of Paris and the economic and cultural forces that gave rise to the bohemian lifestyle.

Elizabeth Wilson’s 2001 book *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* does not focus only on the Parisian phenomenon but is a general history of the idea and culture of the bohemian as it developed from the nineteenth century through to the 1960s.\(^4^4\) In a


manner similar to Clark, Wilson defines bohemia as a politicized space where bourgeois authority is constantly challenged and the boundaries of society are tested. While the book accurately portrays bohemia as a realm of paradoxes and conflict, its scope is too broad and its research too spotty to be a definitive work on the subject.

The work of Jerrold Seigel and Mary Gluck, already mentioned, expands and deepens the approach of Clark and Wilson. Their work focuses specifically on the French notion of bohemia as it developed and, in their views, disintegrated during the years leading up to World War I. The work of both authors will be explored in greater detail here and will serve as a platform for my own study of Gino Severini.

While he admires Clark’s work, Seigel disagrees with his Marxist approach. Like Clark, Seigel sees the bohemian as a product of bourgeois modernity. However, he places an emphasis on the social rather than the economic aspects of this argument. For Seigel, the bohemian was a liminal figure who acted out the inner contradictions of bourgeois individualism and helped reconcile modern society’s opposing needs for social order and self-expression. Seigel further argues that although bourgeois and bohemian lifestyles were diametrically opposed in the popular imagination, their paths often crossed in everyday life, and their social identities were integrally linked.45

This theory agrees with my contention that whereas the conservative bourgeoisie routinely embraced the classical norms and institutions of the old order, their more progressive counterparts were open to artistic innovation as a sign of their allegiance to the lower classes. Since bohemian artists signaled their outsider status by overturning academic conventions and by their outright (and often deliberate) poverty, they inhabited a shadow world that echoed that theorized by earlier writers. Thus, in practice bohemia


45 Seigel, Bohemian Paris, 8.
had a troubling allure for the bourgeoisie by virtue of its transgressive and populist associations, just as the cultured and prosperous world of the bourgeoisie had a mixed appeal for the downtrodden bohemian. Although the term “bohemia” included a wide-spectrum of social types, its avant-garde members all shared a refusal or inability to adopt a stable social identity that would define them unequivocally as either working class or bourgeois. Their very existence as artists and writers on the margins was symptomatic of tensions and conflicts that characterized a society in transition, and also pointed to the instability of cultural codes that had once served to define a strict class hierarchy, now in flux.

According to Seigel, bohemia grew up where the borders of bourgeois existence began to break down, at its lower edges. It was here that those excluded from mainstream bourgeois activities struggled to assert the freedoms and independence that they had been promised by the French Revolution. Their energy was like an enormous pool of bubbling static force and it threatened to overflow and flood ‘respectable’ society at any moment. The bourgeoisie worked hard to contain this flood, but the creative energies, frustration, and desperation that existed at the lower edges of society found ways to break out and assert themselves. Bohemia was one such manifestation of this, according to Seigel. However, Seigel’s assumption that the bohemian subculture was merely (or mostly) a road to the (relative) success of the bourgeoisie is false. While, as we have seen, there was a group of bohemians that did follow this path there were many others who claimed, and continued to claim, the bohemian persona because they desired that designation.

While Seigel’s book is useful for its definitions and acknowledgment of the connection between bourgeois and bohemian societies, he focuses primarily on the literary side of bohemia and thus ignores the role of visual culture in the bohemian

46 Ibid., 11.
matrix. Mary Gluck’s more recent book rectifies this omission and examines bohemia’s relationship with the avant-garde artist as well as the poet and writer. She stresses that although the artistic avant-garde and bohemia are not identical (members of the avant-garde were often bohemians, but the opposite did not always hold true) the preconditions of avant-garde thinking can be identified within the fabric of bohemian life.\(^{47}\) Gluck, following Wilson, believes that the real appeal of bohemia resides in the myth about the "life of the artist" invented by the artists themselves as part of their self-fashioning. This myth was then appropriated and reinvented within the context of popular society, which eventually resulted in the absorption of bourgeois rebellion into mainstream society.\(^{48}\)

Gluck’s account of bohemia is far more theoretical than her predecessors. She discusses how critics have oscillated between the notion of the bohemian as a creator of transcendental art (an aesthetic view upheld by theorists such as Matei Calinescu) and as a product of capitalist modernity (a more popular social and economic view that Gluck claims begins with Walter Benjamin). She aims to bridge this gap by stressing a cultural image of the bohemian, a view that problematizes the notion of social and aesthetic autonomy often associated with modernist art.

Like Clark, Gluck splits the myth of literary bohemia into two distinct, but interrelated types: the ‘sentimental bohemia’ of the 1850s, embodied in Henry Mürger, and the earlier ‘ironic bohemia’ of the 1830s, associated with Théophile Gautier and his fellow Romanticists, who chose the literal embodiment of an idealized (and nonexistent) Middle Ages to show their opposition to bourgeois modernity.\(^{49}\) Thus the ‘ironic bohemian’ was constructed around a series of disguises and fictional personas that can be


\(^{48}\) Ibid., 15

\(^{49}\) Gautier’s circle grew long hair and beards and dressed themselves in medieval costume as both a gesture of nostalgia for the ‘Golden Age’ of literature and as an irreverent and transgressive action that opposed the particular manifestation of modern culture emerging from bourgeois currents in the 1830s.
described as carnivalesque. The concept of the ‘sentimental bohemian’ was circumscribed firmly within the world of bourgeois entertainment and included new and rebellious cultural arenas such as the café and (later) cabarets. While this is a tempting distinction to make, and Gluck’s categories do seem to fit the early manifestations of bohemia, her categories and theories begin to break down around the turn of the century when these locales become increasingly commercialized and absorbed into mainstream society.

Gluck also goes further than Seigel in attempting to extend her theories into the years just before World War I (even though she contradictorily states that the bohemian gesture was already anachronistic by the end of the July Monarchy in 1848) by arguing that bohemian society recreated itself in the guise of primitivism. While I do agree with aspects of Gluck’s basic premise, that avant-garde art at the turn of the century combined the primitivist aesthetic with the physical and psychological spaces of urban life in a way that mimicked older conceptions of the bohemian, I disagree with her application of this theory. She chooses to discuss primitivism almost entirely through the example of Paul Gauguin and gives only brief nods to the primitivist and bohemian tendencies of Paris-based artists like Picasso and Modigliani. While Gauguin’s escape from bourgeois civilization for a simpler life in Tahiti was one reconstitution of bohemian life, there were a number of different bohemian impulses coexisting in Paris and elsewhere during these years.

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50 Defined both by a letting go of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism in favor of subconscious drives and by a need to access the subjective tendencies of an artist’s inner life.

51 Gluck, *Popular Bohemia*, 166.

52 The Futurists did call themselves ‘the Primitives of a new sensibility,’ but this use of the word had a unique meaning. Rather than looking back to a time of innocence they looked into the future to a time when the slate could again be wiped clean (*tabula rasa*) and society could recreate itself. This was a ‘new’ conception of primitivism, one in which instinct and life force would be channeled through the artist who gave himself over entirely to the forces of modernity.
The figure of Gino Severini, for example, is problematic when considered in relation to Gluck’s constructions, especially that of primitivism. He combines the impulses of both the sentimental and ironic bohemias. While he certainly tried to construct his life around the disguises and carnivalesque activities of the avant-garde and took on a distinctly fictional persona, he was also fundamentally reliant upon and connected to bourgeois society (never trying to escape its influence or imagery), both for his livelihood and for his identity. His images (and life) from this time period drew almost exclusively upon commercialized dance-hall culture. Thus I argue that Severini, and perhaps all of bohemia after the turn-of-the-century, cannot fit neatly into one of Gluck’s categories. Bohemia by this time was too invested in the commercial nature of a modern world that increasingly served as a playground for the bourgeoisie.

Because bohemia at the turn of the century was becoming ever more popularized and commercialized, Severini’s reasons for assuming an identity as a bohemian were not necessarily the same as those who came before him. The decision to live a bohemian life was still a choice, but it was less of a self-conscious choice and more a necessity. For foreign artists like Severini, it was absolutely crucial. The bohemian, as he interpreted it, was an accessible persona that had been culturally sanctioned by virtue of its ongoing association with the avant-garde. His adoption of this persona can be seen as a protective mechanism from one perspective, a way to infiltrate the artistic culture of Paris and create out of his bohemian persona a performative gesture. As Gluck justly states in an earlier article on the subject, the figure of the bohemian attained a high degree of symbolic importance among his contemporaries and came to be seen as the first embodiment of the artist of modernity.53 In other words, the persona of the bohemian, despite all of its inherent contradictions, was the perfect mask for foreign artists like Severini who were

II. An Italian in Paris: Severini’s Personal Experience with Bohemia

Severini’s autobiography is remarkably silent regarding the motivations for his move from Italy to Paris; he prefers to leave the specific events and decisions that led him first to Rome, then to Florence (briefly), and finally to Paris, shrouded in mystery. In order to give agency to his lack of detail, we can choose to see it as a conscious decision intended to create a sense of the bohemian characteristic of spontaneity. Regardless of Severini’s rationale for leaving out these details while writing his autobiography, we can use a few cryptic comments combined with other sources to ascertain some of the artist’s true reasons for relocating.\(^5^4\) During his brief discussion of his years in Rome he complains of the negative artistic atmosphere pervading Italy, writing that: “the state of Italian painting at that time was one of the muddiest and most injurious imaginable; under such conditions, even a Raphael would have had difficulty painting a good picture.”\(^5^5\) According to Severini, very little true innovation was taking place in Italy; the only interesting artistic tendency was Divisionism. Italian Divisionism, which will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 2, was dominated by artists based in Milan such as

\(^{5^4}\) Unfortunately we have very little primary information to consult from these first years in Paris. Severini’s life was notoriously unstable and his frequent evictions virtually eradicated all material record of his life, including letters, documents, sketches, and paintings. Likewise, there are surprisingly few letters from Severini preserved in the archives of his friends and relatives. It is only after Severini joined Futurism that we begin to have a reliable paper trail.

\(^{5^5}\) Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 16.
Gaetano Previati and Giovanni Segantini, and was very much influenced by French developments such as Neo-Impressionism.\textsuperscript{56}

Severini’s first exposure to these ideas came through the future Futurist painter Giacomo Balla, who, having just returned from Paris, was “brimming with the theories of Impressionism.”\textsuperscript{57} The young Severini and his close friend Umberto Boccioni (himself a later Futurist) eventually came to refer to Balla as their ‘master’ and greatly respected his abilities as an artist and mentor (see fig. 1-3 as an example of Severini’s developing abilities under Balla).\textsuperscript{58} However, despite Balla’s enthusiasm and talent Severini felt that the older artist failed to give himself and Boccioni adequate knowledge of the fundamental and scientific rules behind Divisionist and Impressionist techniques. Boccioni (who made a brief trip to the French capital in the spring of 1906, slightly earlier than Severini) observed in a 1907 letter to Severini that ‘Balla, educated when painting in general was declining… is absolutely missing the decorative vision, only that which can make great a work of art. Balla, maybe as a result of his own force, has searched and studied much but in a circle already marked by young people… He is missing the sense of measure that all the great artists possess… Stopping too much in the observation of a leaf has made him forget that above his head birds sing.’\textsuperscript{59} It was clear to Severini that if he desired to truly immerse himself in the study of painting’s new

\textsuperscript{56} Vivien Greene, ed., \textit{Radical Light: Italy’s Divisionist Painters, 1891-1910} (London: National Gallery of London, 2008). Ironically, Previati and Segantini were two of only three artists to be referred to favorably in the 1910 ‘Manifesto of Futurist Painters’ (the third was the sculptor Medardo Rosso).

\textsuperscript{57} Severini, \textit{The Life of a Painter}, 16.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Letter from Umberto Boccioni to Gino Severini, October or November 1907, MART, Fondo Severini, Sev.I.3.2.2. The fact that Boccioni made his own trip to Paris in 1906 has been almost entirely ignored by scholars.
directions he could not acquire this knowledge second-hand and would thus have to go to its source—Paris.

An article later published by Severini in the Roman journal *L’Arte* in 1931 adds further value to this claim. He writes:

“Thus, one beautiful day, I gave in to the desire to represent reality according to my interior sentiments, rather than according to uniquely pictorial aspirations… Without realizing it, I had achieved a new painting by another path… I continued to research analogues of the same sort, but everything was wrong; thus I was far from feeling satisfied, and to resolve my problem I decided to go to Paris.”

This statement supports the generally-held belief that Severini’s decision to go to Paris was fundamentally artistic. He intuitively knew that if he were to surpass the perceived limitations of the Italian art world he would have to leave the country.

By late 1905 Severini had already left Rome behind for Florence, where he received a commission to paint copies of Renaissance paintings at the Uffizi for a Dutch patron whom he had previously met at the ‘Refusal Exhibition,’ an independent exhibition for works that were rejected from the state sanctioned ‘Amatori e Cultori’ exhibit in Rome. Since this attempt at commissioned work was ultimately unsuccessful (none of the artist’s copies pleased his benefactor), moving on to Paris was perhaps the

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62 Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 22. The Dutch patron is identified only as a banker from Bois-le-Duc.
next logical step in his artistic growth. Additionally, the only person to have taken true interest in his work at this stage was an older French woman named Madame Bertaux, whom he had met while working in Florence (fig. 1-4). This woman’s generous nature (and material means) may have been significant in his decision to settle in Paris. Perhaps his relocation was influenced by the hope that, given his dismal prospects of patronage and success in Italy, the French would generally have more of an appreciation for his work.

Whatever the planning and decision-making process (or lack thereof) that went into Severini’s move, he portrays himself in his autobiography as having a unique sense of purpose and destiny as soon as he stepped off the train in Paris. He writes that he “took the white tram that an English sculptor [Monsieur Blake] in Rome had recommended, went straight to Montparnasse, and “ordered [his] first café-au-lait at a little bar on the corner of boulevard Montparnasse and boulevard Raspail.” Aside from a brief visit to Notre-Dame that first evening, Severini did not spend his time sightseeing. Instead he insisted on immediately “living like a seasoned Parisian.” With this statement Severini carefully distinguishes himself from tourists coming to Paris to see the sights. He

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63 Ibid., 24.

64 Madame Bertaux helped Severini significantly by paying the first installment of his rent and the downpayment on the furniture for his first Parisian apartment at 36 rue Ballu, Montmartre. She also found commissions for him in his first months in Paris. Without this assistance Severini’s fate in Paris might have been very different.

65 While Severini had earned a small amount of critical acclaim as a result of his participation in the ‘Amatori e Cultori’ show in Rome in 1904, the following year his paintings were categorically rejected and his prospects were looking bleak.


67 Ibid., 26.
emphasizes that his relocation to France was conceived as a lifelong pursuit and not as a short-lived adventure.  

His memories of those first few days in Paris, spent in a cheap hotel in Montparnasse, were full of mixed emotions. He recalls:

“Few have ever arrived in an unfamiliar city as penniless and helpless as I was. I had no friends, no money (barring the 50 francs I counted in my pocket that evening), only a scant knowledge of French, and, most important of all, I had no profession; I was a nonentity. Was I a painter? a copyist? a caricaturist, a fashion or mechanical draughtsman? I had none of those skills and no visible means of support. Nevertheless, I arrived at the Gare de Lyon in a lighthearted, ebullient frame of mind.”

III. Montmartre: An Artist’s Mecca

While his initial decision to go directly to Montparnasse seems to have been predicated upon advice that he received from acquaintances in Rome, Severini soon revised his plans. Shortly after arriving in Paris he met Gino Calza-Bini, a friend from the Italian capital, while walking through Montmartre. Calza-Bini was staying in Paris for a short time on his way to London and had rented a small apartment in Montmartre. Severini was invited several times to lunch there and it was Calza-Bini who ultimately convinced him to transfer across the Seine to Montmartre. His sojourn in Montparnasse

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68 While Severini prefers to keep his recollections of his first days in Paris vague in his autobiography, there are other primary resources that will be discussed throughout the course of this dissertation that offer fresher and more exact memories, most importantly a letter written by Umberto Boccioni to his mother and sister a few days after arriving in the French capital on his own initial trip in April 1906 (transcribed in Z. Birolli, Umberto Boccioni. Gli scritti editi e inediti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971), p. 332-338.) Given that Boccioni and Severini were good friends in Rome and continued a close relationship until Boccioni’s death in 1916 it is highly probable that their initial recollections about Paris would have had similar sentiments and that they would have shared their thoughts and ideas.

69 Severini, Life of a Painter, 25.

70 Interestingly, Severini appears to never have lived within the political boundaries of Montmartre as it was drawn on an official map. His apartments were slightly southwest of the Place Clichy, which formed the
had lasted less than a month.\textsuperscript{71} The decision to permanently reside in Montmartre would deeply affect all that came after.\textsuperscript{72} The specific environs of Montmartre, its artistic community, and the bohemian lifestyle adopted by many of its inhabitants created a unique environment which must be carefully considered in order to better understand Severini’s artistic production before World War I.

Severini writes that “at the time I did not realize the historical importance of living there [Montmartre]. It was immediately clear that its atmosphere was very different from that of the grands boulevards, but I was not yet in a position to recognize the kind of intense, interesting life seething in those little streets.”\textsuperscript{73} However, it was not long before the artist learned of the area’s offerings and significance. In a section of his memoirs added to the text after its first edition Severini wrote that he recognized Montmartre as having “certainly planted the seed and become the center of the revolt against academic art.”\textsuperscript{74} He also says that “it was common knowledge (in Italy as well) that revolutionary feelings against the academy were brewing in the hearts of all those

\textsuperscript{71} Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 26. Severini’s arrival in Montparnasse was a bit too early: the XIV\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement of Paris would inherit the artistic atmosphere of Montmartre in the interwar years. For more information see, for example, Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan, \textit{The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905-1945} (New York: Universe Books, 1998).

\textsuperscript{72} Although Severini’s first studios in Paris were just outside the official boundaries of Montmartre his life and character were so wrapped up in the cultural life of the quarter that this detail is insignificant. As Phillip Denis Cate wrote in his essay “The Spirit of Montmartre”, “Paris has two Montmartres: the official Montmartre, classified for administrative purposes as the 18\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement;...The other is an arbitrary Montmartre whose limit [just as those of bohemia] may change depending on the vogue for certain establishments, but whose center always remains the Butte.” (Cate and Shaw, eds., \textit{The Spirit of Montmartre}, 19)

\textsuperscript{73} Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 32.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 33.
who gathered and then settled in Montmartre.\textsuperscript{75} Although Severini may not have initially been aware of this portentous significance, he clearly recognized in retrospect that his relocation to Montmartre had been particularly fortuitous.

At the turn of the century Paris was a collection of intersecting microcosms or communities that both supported and opposed each other. There was (and continues to be) a delicate balance maintained between the twenty arrondissements that make up the city, many of which had been isolated villages in their own right prior to the reign of Napoleon III. Even within the city there were distinct differences between each arrondissement. For example, the I\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement on the right bank of the Seine is home to the major commercial district that was made famous by Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, while the V\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement (known as the Latin Quarter) on the opposite side of the river owes its lively character to a high concentration of universities and student housing. Both are integral parts of the city, but they attract very different types of people and business ventures. Likewise, Montmartre (the XVIII\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement) gained a reputation for questionable activities and a revolutionary nature. This unique identity could only be defined and maintained in opposition to the more bourgeois-centered sections of Paris, such as the neighboring IX\textsuperscript{e} arrondissement, home to the large department store Galeries Lafayette.

Montmartre was at the heart of the international art world during these years. By the early 1880s much of the innovative artistic and cultural activity taking place in Paris had shifted from the Latin Quarter to the areas around Montmartre, specifically near the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 34.
Nouvelle Athènes, place Pigalle, boulevard Rochechouart, and the Batignolles. By lax censorship, lower taxes, cheap rent, and the singular history of the area (discussed below) were largely responsible for the district’s appeal. By playing up his association with the area Severini situates himself consciously or unconsciously as the heir to a very long and prestigious list of artists working in and influenced by the environs of Montmartre, including Géricault, Cézanne, Manet, Van Gogh, Moreau, Renoir, and Degas.

Montmartre, as discussed by contemporary artists and writers as well as later scholars, was both an international locus for artistic and intellectual figures as well as a hotbed for popular entertainment. Severini’s relocation to Montmartre and his project to insert himself into Parisian society there took place during a time when the cultural and popular activity of the region was at its zenith. Originally a rural region to the north of the city, Montmartre (figs. 1-5 and 1-6) was a relatively new addition to Paris, annexed by the city in 1860. This annexation corresponded with the considerable efforts of Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann to ‘modernize’ Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. Baron Haussmann was commissioned by Napoleon III to redesign the urban layout of

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77 Montmartre was a recent addition to the city of Paris. Thus, being outside the original walls of the city it was not subject to the same laws as the older arrondissements.


79 Cate and Shaw, eds. *The Spirit of Montmartre*, 19. Montmartre was within the old medieval walls of the city but outside Adolphe Theirs’ wall of the 1840s. Its annexation and the outer boulevards built around the *arrondissements* formalized Montmartre’s position within the physical boundaries of Paris.
Paris, resulting in the demolition of huge sections of the city to make room for a radiating network of avenues and grand boulevards.\textsuperscript{80} These new thoroughfares also had the effect (desired by city planners) of integrating the city’s previously disjointed neighborhoods and allowing easier access to outlying quarters and formerly isolated suburban sections. Montmartre was one quarter that benefited (depending on one’s perspective) from these changes.

One of the side effects of so-called Haussmanization (a term used to describe the Baron’s new design for the city) was the disappearance of old neighborhoods from the center of Paris.\textsuperscript{81} These neighborhoods had remained largely untouched by the industrial age and still retained a spider-web configuration of dark alleys and twisting streets that characterized the original medieval city. These streets were, among other things, a haven for the lower classes and a wide array of marginalized social circles. When these sections were razed and rebuilt in Haussmann’s regularized Beaux-Arts fashion they increasingly became the domain of the upper middle classes, displacing the earlier residents. Forced out of the city center by ongoing construction, Haussmann’s gentrification, and rising property values, the former working-class inhabitants of these areas moved towards the outlying sections of Paris.\textsuperscript{82} Montmartre’s rustic character and cheap rents made it an attractive place for many of these displaced souls to relocate.\textsuperscript{83}


\textsuperscript{81} Nearly every neighborhood was affected, with the interesting exception of the Left Bank and neighborhoods such as the Marais, which largely continued its slide into decay until recent urban renewal projects.

\textsuperscript{82} Jordan, p. 106 and Buisson and Parisot, 18.

\textsuperscript{83} Montmartre’s population peaked in 1931, just after World War I and has steadily decreased since then.
Montmartre also gained a reputation as a hotbed of radical activity due to its identification with the Commune of Paris, a revolutionary government that took over the city in the wake of France’s humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870.\(^8^4\) The Commune only lasted six weeks, from mid-March to late May 1871, but its memory lingered long afterward in the urban fabric and unconventional nature of Montmartre. Despite popular opinion, the Commune was not the product of organized planning but had arisen almost spontaneously from a population too long suppressed and embittered by war.\(^8^5\) Interestingly, a mixed class base that included both bourgeois and working class members supported the initial uprising. However, as the weeks wore on and enormous obstacles to success (such as in-fighting and an imminent counterattack from Versailles) became evident, many of those with material means withdrew their support from the Commune and fled the city. This left the direction and responsibility for the new government increasingly in inexperienced working-class hands, a position which ultimately weakened the Commune and made it vulnerable to the impending attack from Versailles.

Although the Commune was quickly suppressed, Montmartre itself became a code name for revolutionary uprising and illicit activity, a mythic image augmented by the district’s long tradition of independence and defiance.\(^8^6\) This was not a retrospective

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\(^8^6\) Richard D. Sonn, ‘Marginality and Transgression: Anarchy’s Subversive Allure’, *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel Weisberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 123. Montmartre’s reputation as a hotbed of transgression has now unfortunately been reduced to a few blocks and those are themselves firmly inscribed in the marketing and tourism of the city.
label but a characteristic that was also noticed by contemporary observers.\textsuperscript{87} From the perspective of the upper classes, the Commune was the logical outcome of the moral disorder and lack of discipline that had characterized bohemian tendencies in French intellectual life throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{88} The participants in this bohemian world viewed this same trend in a more positive light. Precisely because of their history of difference and rebellion the locals in Montmartre cultivated a view of themselves as existing in a world apart from the more conservative bourgeois order that had given birth to the Third Republic. It was this difference and sense of freedom that attracted artists and bohemians seeking a refuge from conventional society.

By the 1880s Montmartre had taken over as the seat of avant-garde artistic culture in Paris (between 1860 and 1910 more than five hundred artists were to settle in Montmartre).\textsuperscript{89} The quarter, by this time, was already known as a hotspot for prostitution, drugs, and other illicit activities. Contemporary artists often referenced these characteristics through the use of signs and symbols. One of the most famous examples of this is Théophile Alexandre Steinlen’s \textit{Tournée du Chat Noir} from 1896 (fig. 1-7). Created as a poster for Rodolphe Salis’ well-known cabaret, the \textit{Chat Noir}, Steinlen’s hieratic and menacing image of the black cat, which already had a history of use as a metaphor for sexual arousal and alternative religious sentiments as seen in figure 1-8 (discussed in further detail in chapter 3), denotes not only the irreverent and provocative

\textsuperscript{87} For example the Mur des Fédérés in Père Lachaise Cemetary, where 147 Communards had been executed, became a site of pilgrimage and memory for many contemporary Montmartre inhabitants.

\textsuperscript{88} Seigel 182.

\textsuperscript{89} Buisson and Parisot, 20.
nature of the cabaret but of the entire district.\textsuperscript{90} This theme was later incorporated into one of Severini’s most enduring images in the Divisionist technique from his early years in Paris, \textit{Le chat noir} from 1910-11 (fig. 1-9).\textsuperscript{91}

Although almost exclusively discussed in relation to Edgar Allen Poe’s 1841 story of the same name,\textsuperscript{92} Severini’s painting \textit{Le chat noir} is also clearly a reference to Salis’ cabaret and its legendary status in Montmartre.\textsuperscript{93} The piercing stares of the two depicted cats (one with only one eye) and the glass of wine draw out the most identifiable aspects of Poe’s story but also refer back to the iconic image drawn by Steinlen fifteen years earlier and the legacy of Montmartre’s thriving cabaret culture in the years before the turn of the century.

In many ways there were two distinct areas of Montmartre: the \textit{Butte}, or the summit of the hill where old windmills intermixed with cheap housing (figs. 1-10 and 1-11), and the more developed quarter below, where Parisians from all walks of life came to seek cheap and thrilling entertainment (figs. 1-12 and 1-13).\textsuperscript{94} The dual nature of

\textsuperscript{90} The stained glass window from \textit{Le Chat Noir}, in my opinion, deliberately mocks specifically Catholic religious traditions and symbols in a number of ways. The woman raises the black cat over her head in a way that is reminiscent of the raising of the host (the full moon also echoes this through its shape). It also plays with the questionable virtue of the women of Montmartre through the white lily (a symbol of virtue and purity) tucked into the sash around her waist. These same symbols can also be interpreted as referring to witchcraft. The full moon, the black cat, and the scarabs that cover the woman’s dress show her to be not only dealing with the sex trade but also with witchcraft and the subjugation of Catholicism as a dominant religion (we must also remember that this was during the time that Sacré Coeur (begun in 1875) was being erected on top of the butte as an unquestionable symbol of Catholicism’s hoped-for power over the district).

\textsuperscript{91} This technique and its complex signification of meanings are further discussed in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{92} Edgar Allen Poe’s story recounts a tale of violence and passion in which a drunkard blinds and later kills his trusted pet cat, a perverse action that leads to a series of tragedies and the drunkard’s ultimate betrayal by another (or the same, but reincarnated) black cat.

\textsuperscript{93} Daniela Fonti gives a brief nod to the image’s relationship to the cabaret in her catalogue \textit{The Dance}, 19.
Montmartre as both a locus of revolutionary and illicit activity and as a reminder of the picturesque quality of the Parisian countryside before the population explosion and Haussmannization of the nineteenth century made it all the more attractive to the modernist avant-garde. Dance-halls, bars, cabarets, and circuses lined the boulevards at the bottom of the Butte, while brothels, beggars, pimps, and thieves could be found along the side streets. The rough and dangerous nature of this section was every bit as important to its allure as were the sites of popular entertainment. The Butte, on the other hand, largely retained its village character until 1914 when it became a tourist locale, the most visible symbol of which was the imposing structure of the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur. Although the basilica was not popular with residents of Montmartre (as it was built in memory of the clergy who had been killed by the Communards and had the specific project of bringing the Butte back under the shadow of the Catholic Church), it marked the Butte as a historical place of sacred pilgrimage, a reputation that originated with the much older abbey church of Saint-Pierre and possibly a much older Roman temple. In fact, legend has it that the name Montmartre was derived from the appellation ‘hill of the martyrs.’ Thus this ‘sacred’ and ‘picturesque’ Montmartre contrasted strongly with the ‘profane’ nature of the rest of the district. However, as the historian Jerrold Seigel has

94 Since Montmartre fell outside the official city customs walls, the majority of its establishments were exempt from the excise tax and thus were able to provide food, drink, and entertainment at a lower price than other Parisian establishments (Seigel, 337).

95 Sacré-Coeur was begun in 1875, but not finished until 1914.

96 Traditional accounts state that Saint-Pierre de Montmartre was founded by Saint Denis in the third century. The existing building dates from the Merovingian period and was consecrated in 1147, although it was largely rebuilt in the nineteenth century due to damage from the French Revolution.

97 This is only one of the legends pertaining to the name ‘Montmartre.’ Another states that the region was named after the Roman Temple of Mars (or possibly Mercury), built on the top of the Butte (Buisson and Parisot, *Paris Montmartre*, 195).
stated, the separation between the two Montmartres was never complete and both were imbued with a sense of theatricality and self-consciousness that many came to associate with bohemia.98

By the end of the nineteenth century Montmartre’s reputation as a hotbed of revolutionary activity was indelibly altered (although its mythic status remained). Its rebellious character was increasingly contained and sublimated into entertainment and spectacle that could be packaged for the consumption of the Parisian (or foreign tourist) in search of an adventure. The production of culture in Montmartre gradually passed from bohemians to professionals and its locales began to center around high-profile advertising, profit margins, media coverage, sensation, and scandal.

This shift was resisted by many contemporary observers who insisted on seeing the fundamental nature of Montmartre as free of this taint of commercialism. Writers such as André Warnod, who published *Le vieux Montmartre* in 1911 and other nostalgic writings, largely perpetuated the myth of Montmartre as a realm separate from the industrialization and commercialization of Paris.99 Although his later books, such as *Les berceaux de la jeune peinture: Montmartre, Montparnasse* from 1925, gave greater credibility to the changing nature of the quarter, Warnod continued to dwell on the sentimental and nostalgic image of life in Montmartre.100 Even when the author discusses the more dangerous figures that came to inhabit the region, he imbues them with a brutality that in no way detracted from their allure.

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98 Seigel, 338.


Another well-known contemporary observer of Montmartre was the writer and art critic Francis Carco, who arrived in Montmartre in 1907, one year later than Severini, from his birthplace in New Caledonia. A frequent visitor to the more quaint cabarets on the Butte, such as the Lapin Agile, Carco’s depictions of life in Montmartre tended towards the picturesque (or even romantic). However, like Severini, he also was drawn to the exhibitionism and theatrical nature of the quarter’s street life and bohemian population. He often wrote in argot, the street slang of Paris. It is for this reason that Carco has been called the ‘romancier des apâches,’ an allusion to his stories of the rough and tumble street gangs referred to as ‘apâches’ for their savage nature and immoral character. He believed that the violence and despair emanating from these figures gave Montmartre its particular character and was partially responsible for the originality of the artistic developments that took place there. Thus, in the eyes of at least some contemporary observers the criminal aspect of Montmartre was intimately connected to the artistic community that also made its home in Montmartre.

Interestingly, while many contemporary observers chose not to see, or at least recognize, the fundamental shift in the nature of the district, for some—such as

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101 Carco wrote his first memoir on Montmartre in 1919 and continued to produce variations on the theme through the early 1940s. His attitude towards Montmartre remains remarkably consistent over the years and they all look back to his early years in the district with an evident nostalgia. Both Carco and Warnod are mentioned in Severini’s memoirs.

102 The term ‘apache’ was a term coined by the journalist Arthur Dupin in 1902 to refer to the ‘savages’ of the Parisian underclass: hooligans with “the manners of the apaches of the Far-West, the native scum of our civilization.” Quoted in Lisa Tickner, Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 83; see also, Richard Sonn, Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France (Lincoln, NB: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989). The apache and the popular dance of the same name will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

103 Francis Carco, Bohème d’artiste (Paris: A. Michel, 1940), 243.

104 For more on Carco see Lisa Appignanesi’s The Cabaret (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
Severini—the increasingly modern and commercial nature of Montmartre became its most appealing characteristic.\textsuperscript{105} It was a liminal realm, or borderland, bound up in the transgression of dominant social codes. Despite (or perhaps because of) their newfound success as commercial venues, many locales in Montmartre continued to be known as sites of transgressive and divergent activity and were likewise famous for fostering the artistic production of the avant-garde.

**IV: Severini’s Construction of a Bohemian Persona**

Just as living in Montmartre was a crucial part of Gino Severini’s bohemian persona, so were the places he frequented, the people he knew, and the particular self-image that he projected. His love of socializing and entertainment made him a regular fixture in the dance and music-halls (discussed in more detail in chapter 3), as well as the cafés, salons, and cabarets located in the \textit{Boulevards} around Clichy and Rochechouart and also higher on the \textit{Butte}.\textsuperscript{106} These locales were more than just places of food, drink, and entertainment, but played a crucial role in Montmartre’s social network, serving as meeting-places and creating a suitable environment for group discussions (or rather arguments) on every topic.

The first private salon to which Severini was invited in Paris was held every Saturday at the home of an elderly Italian painter named Signorini [Severini does not give his first name], to whom Gino Calza-Bini had introduced his friend. That first evening


\textsuperscript{106} Many dance-halls and café were situated in this area to make them accessible to patrons ‘crossing over’ from more reputable areas of Paris, a fact that contributed to its inevitable commercialization.
Signorini also invited Giacomo Puccini and his wife. Severini writes that the composer’s “affability and the modesty of his manners completely captivated me, especially since his *Bohème* was then one of my great passions.”\(^{107}\) This incident demonstrates not only how quickly Severini was integrating himself into Parisian society (or at least the Italian expatriate community) but it also shows that he had prior knowledge of both Mürger’s writing (whom he had casually mentioned earlier in his autobiography) and Puccini’s popular adaptation of *Scènes de la vie bohème*\(^{108}\). It seems that he did not randomly happen upon the bohemian lifestyle, but intentionally sought it out, having already read and researched a great deal about the phenomenon prior to his move to Paris.\(^{109}\) A painting called *La Bohèmienne* (1905) from early in Severini’s career also bolsters this claim (fig. 1-14). The woman’s lackadaisical posture, peasant dress, and expression of disdain give credence to the title and gives us a good idea of the largely romantic conception Severini had of bohemia before his move to Paris in 1906.\(^{110}\)

A chance meeting with Amedeo Modigliani one day on rue Lepic, in front of the famous dance-hall *Moulin de la Galette*, further introduced Severini to the world of Parisian cafés and cabarets. Modigliani specifically pointed out the *Lapin Agile* and *Mère Adèle’s* as meeting places for all the important artists and writers in the area. *The Lapin* Adèle’s as meeting places for all the important artists and writers in the area. *The Lapin*

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\(^{107}\) Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 27

\(^{108}\) Despite Severini’s attempt to cast his life in Rome as ‘bohemian’ Mürger himself wrote that ‘Bohemia does not exist and is not possible anywhere but in Paris.’ (Mürger, *Scenes de la vie bohème*, 7).

\(^{109}\) Severini also mentions in this same passage that Italy may have possessed the same bohemian tendencies as France but it was never developed because they had no Mürger to record it (Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 19).

\(^{110}\) Interestingly this painting was completed during or shortly after a brief trip to Paris that the painter made in 1905. While Severini fails to acknowledge this early trip to Paris in his autobiography, preferring instead to present himself arriving in October 1906 with no firsthand prior knowledge of the French capital, it is important to realize that this is a posture taken by the artist years after the fact and does not necessarily represent the facts.
Agile in particular was the heir to other historical bohemian locales dating back to the infamous Chat Noir (fig. 1-15) and other notorious Montmartre cabarets from the 1880s.\textsuperscript{111} Prior to this artists, critics, and writers gathered together at the Café Gerbois (in an area of the 17th arrondissement known as the Batignolles) referred to as the ‘bande à Manet.’ In Severini’s time this was replaced in importance by the ‘bande à Picasso,’ which met at the Lapin Agile (figs. 1-16 and 1-17) in Montmartre. Severini, Modigliani, and several other Italians began to frequent this locale and found themselves welcomed (to varying degrees) by the other regulars.

Severini states that his first (French) friend in the Paris art world was Suzanne Valadon, already a legendary figure in Parisian bohemia, who took pity on the starving and freezing artist and dragged him into Mère Adèle’s café for a glass of hot grog on a cold winter day. It was that moment that Severini identifies as the “real beginning of my life in Montmartre.”\textsuperscript{112} Soon after Severini and his compatriots found themselves part of the intellectual community centered in the Lapin Agile and other area hotspots such as Père Azon’s restaurant. Severini gives a long list of the group that gathered at these places, including among others, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Guillaume Apollinaire, Kees


\textsuperscript{112} Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 32.
Van Dongen, Jacques Villon, Maurice Raynal, Max Jacob, Roland Dorgelès, Warnod, and Carco. Another fortuitous friendship that Severini formed at this time was with the theater impresario Aurélien Lugné-Poë, a well-known avant-garde and bohemian character (discussed in more detail in chapter 2).

Severini not only participated in the intellectual café and theater culture in Montmartre but was also caught up in the spirit of *fumisme* or *blague* that characterized bohemian life. *Fumisme* (as it was defined by Severini) can be described as a feeling of disdain for everything and a refusal to treat the world with seriousness and respect, which led to ironic farces and practical jokes. A short anecdote about the artist will help to illustrate this sentiment and Severini’s participation in it. Severini reportedly became famous in Montmartre because he wore socks in complementary colors, one green and one red, to signal his enthusiasm for the precepts of Neo-Impressionism. Although Severini himself downplays this incident in his memoirs, others including Fernande Olivier, Picasso’s partner, wrote about it as a memorable event that enabled Severini to

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113 Ibid., 34.

114 Lugné-Poë interestingly added the surname ‘Poë’ to his name out of admiration for the American writer, whom he also claimed was a distant relative.

115 Jeffrey Weiss’ book *The Popular Culture of Modern Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) discusses *blague* primarily in relation to the work and life of Marcel Duchamp but also maintains that *blague* and its relative *fumisme* originated in the late nineteenth century.

116 Neo-Impressionism was an important influence on Severini’s artistic development and a desire to learn more about this particular manner of painting ranked as one of the primary reasons for the artist’s relocation to Paris.

117 Severini dismissed this bizarre choice of apparel as a minor event in his autobiography, writing that he “paid very little attention to this parody of avant-garde art in general” (Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 37). This is indicative of the distance he insists upon maintaining between this bohemian and avant-garde culture and his later artistic life.
advertise his aesthetic ideals through his physical appearance. Visual jokes like this enabled the artist to perform his own exoticism as a foreigner and dandy (a fashionable man about town) while simultaneously merging his identity with that of his artwork.

Fumisme, or some version of it, came naturally to Severini. He writes in his autobiography about his early love of practical jokes and comedic theater while still in Cortona. He also devotes an entire section of his autobiography to an event from 1912 (the same year as the Bernheim-Jeune Futurist exhibit) when Roland Dorgelès dipped the tail of a donkey belonging to Frédéric Gérard (known as Père Frédé), proprietor of the Lapin Agile, into various cans of paint and then had the animal swish its tail across a blank canvas. He gave the resulting ‘painting’ the title Sunset over the Adriatic, signed it ‘Boronali’ (an anagram of aliboron, meaning jackass in French but also a fake Italian-sounding name) and submitted the canvas successfully to the 1912 Salon des Indépendants (figs. 1-18 and 1-19). Many were amused by the prank but others saw it as a terrible affront to the avant-garde in general and to the Futurists in particular, who were then struggling to make a name for themselves in Paris. Severini downplays this story in order to avoid taking sides in the ensuing scandal (thus placing himself outside all possible criticism), but writes about it to illustrate the bohemian atmosphere in Montmartre during those years.

Irony and incomprehensibility quickly became a theme of avant-garde art itself. In the case of the Parisian art world this produced a system of inside jokes meant to be

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118 Severini, Life of a Painter, 61.

119 Ibid., 3.

120 Ibid., 36-37. This is just one of many such examples. Other famous incidents include Francisque Poulbot’s fake marriage to his girlfriend. This was an annual event that was eventually turned into a costume ball and a parade.
understood only by those within its culture. The resulting antagonism between the avant-garde and the general public was taken to extremes by the Futurists, whose *serata* (chaotic stagings of poetry, music, and general nonsense) were designed to be a calculated affront to public taste. By using the actual materials and visual markers of popular culture, avant-garde artists were able to play with the codes of mass culture and turn them upside down. While it seems that Severini was less willing to parody popular culture than his peers, the story of the socks makes clear that he was a participant in the *fumisme* rampant among members of the avant-garde.

Severini’s bohemian existence was far from idyllic, however. As we have seen he was constantly out of money and often relied on friends or chance encounters with those of more means to get him through hard times. In fact, his autobiography is full of straightforward admissions and complaints about his constant poverty, ill health, and hardships. He had no qualms about seeking help and taking it when it was offered.\(^{121}\) Thus, despite his outward independent bohemian appearance and persona, Severini was highly dependent on charity, often from distinctly bourgeois sources, such as Monsignor Passerini, the Dutch banker, Madame Bertraux, and increasingly from F.T. Marinetti after his adherence to Futurism. Marianne Martin devotes an entire article to the artist’s tumultuous relationship with the Futurist founder, emphasizing that monetary troubles and Marinetti’s continual refusal to publish Severini’s manifesto, “The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism” (1913) were primarily responsible for their troubled alliance (discussed further in chapter 4).\(^{122}\) Likewise, many of the letters found in Futurist archives around

\(^{121}\) Severini does, however, mention occasionally trying to scrape together small amounts of money for his more destitute friends, such as Gino Baldo (Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 46).
the world refer to Severini’s financial troubles and his constant need for immediate payment. For example, a letter from Boccioni to Severini from 1911 states that Severini must wait until Marinetti visits Rome to be paid the remainder of a sale to a Signor Costa. Throughout his autobiography Severini wavers back and forth between a longing for greater economic stability and a disdain for the comfortable but stultifying lifestyle of the bourgeoisie. While Severini’s autobiography was written late in his life when he had achieved relative prosperity, he nevertheless still wished to stress his contempt for bourgeois customs as antithetical to his own avant-gardism.

One of Severini’s most long-standing and successful relationships with a bourgeois family resulted in his semi-adoption into the home and family of Pierre Declide, a dental student originally from the town of Civray in the Poitou region (fig. 1-20). Severini met Declide through an employee of the St. Lazare train station and his first impression is telling: he writes, “the young dentist was a curious individual. He had all the requisites of a typical provincial and at the same time, those of a Parisian. The first he acquired at birth, the others came from his reckless student days.” This combination of provinciality and urbanism struck a cord with Severini, who described his younger self in much the same way. Both men, upon arriving in Paris, worked hard to fit into the urban fabric of the city, but also repeatedly took pride in their provincial origins.

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122 Marianne W. Martin, “Carissimo Marinetti: Letters from Severini to the Futurist Chief,” in Art Journal, vol. 41, n. 4 (Winter 1981), 305-312. This article was primarily based on the Marinetti archives at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Anne Coffin Hanson later published these in their entirety in Severini futurista (New Haven, CT: Yale University Gallery of Art, 1996).

123 Letter from Umberto Boccioni to Gino Severini, 31 December 1911 (MART Sev.1.3.2.4)

124 Ibid., 48.
V. Severini’s Outward Appearance

Despite the stress put on his humble origins in his autobiography (his father was a lowly steward and his mother a dressmaker), and his distaste for a working man’s life, Severini was highly conscious of his outward appearance and took extreme pride in his ability to dress well and display impeccable manners. The bohemian lifestyle, by all accounts, was one that needed to be dramatized. Upon moving to Paris, Severini was in a position to begin his life over again, cultivating and dramatizing a distinct and largely fictional persona. This willful act of aestheticized self-fashioning was modeled after another social type associated with bohemia: the dandy, a figure exemplified in popular imagination by British figures like Beau Brummel, Oscar Wilde and the American James Abbott McNeill Whistler (discussed in further detail in chapter 5).

Charles Baudelaire, who exemplified the “dandy” type during his twenties, defines the dandy as an ultra-individualist who had ‘no profession other than elegance… no other status but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons.”¹²⁵ Like the bohemian, the dandy inhabits a liminal space, but one defined in terms of an aristocratic rather than populist self-fashioning.¹²⁶ The dandy defies social convention by adopting the cool demeanor and stylish appearance of an aristocratic man-about-town while lacking the economic or social standing of the true aristocrat. The dandy’s aristocratic self-fashioning serves to define his cultural superiority to the moneyed bourgeois, while

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¹²⁵ Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life (1863), 27.

¹²⁶ Olga Vainshtein in her article “Dandyism, Visual Games, and the Strategies of Representation” from the collection of essays The Men’s Fashion Reader (eds. Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas) argues a similar point but focuses on the nineteenth century, while I bring the argument into the twentieth century.

Thus, the French dandy shared the bohemian contempt for the middle class, even as he rejected the working-class cultural codes that many of his bohemian brothers self-consciously embraced.

In Severini’s case, Baudelaire’s general premise that dandyism signaled the triumph of personal artifice over nature proves especially compelling. Severini cultivated the image of a modern dandy and bohemian through his aloof behavior and his scrupulous attention to dress. He insists in his autobiography on chronicling his fashion choices and devotes an inordinate amount of time to descriptions of his own clothing and that of his friends, often lamenting his lack of adequate apparel and bursting with pride when he had a new suit (figs. 1-21 and 1-22).\footnote{For example, he talks of being invited to a Saturday reception (salon) by Mrs. Prini in Rome that both flattered and embarrassed him as he was poorly dressed at the time. He says that he went but kept his back against a wall in order to hide the places he had mended his pants (Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 20).} It was very important to Severini that he convey the correct impression through his attire and he, like other dandies throughout history, used his clothing as his armor. His affected, detached manner and accompanying love of entertainment and pleasure were also both characteristics of Baudelaire’s definition of the dandy.

One unmistakable symbol of the dandy, the monocle, was often exhibited by Severini, as well as by Marinetti and other ‘fashionable men about town’\footnote{Vainshtein, 85.} This optical device was not only an aid in viewing others but it also made the wearer himself stand out as a desirable object of observation. I will discuss this idea of the observed vs. the


\footnotetext[128]{For example, he talks of being invited to a Saturday reception (salon) by Mrs. Prini in Rome that both flattered and embarrassed him as he was poorly dressed at the time. He says that he went but kept his back against a wall in order to hide the places he had mended his pants (Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 20).}

\footnotetext[129]{Vainshtein, 85.}
observer further in chapter 5, but it is important to bring it up here as an attribute of
Severini’s cultivated dandyism.

At this point it is useful to compare Severini with Picasso, with whom he was on
friendly terms. Both artists were newly arrived foreigners attempting to carve out a niche
for themselves in the Parisian art world. Although they lived a similar lifestyle and
frequented many of the same locales, their approaches to dress and demeanor were very
different. Picasso dressed down, associating himself with the lower classes, while
Severini dressed up and took on the image of a dandy (figs. 1-23 and 1-24). In his
autobiography Severini writes that Picasso “wore a light-colored suit very similar to my
own, but his had a ‘sporty’ elegance, like that of a mechanic in his ‘Sunday best,’ while
mine was closer to fashions of the so-called outer boulevards.”

Although outwardly the two artists cultivated very different personas, both were inscribed within the world of
bohemian Paris, a realm that provided comfortable places for the marginalized to exist.
As foreigners and outsiders they could turn their differences into desirable and exotic
qualities.

Perhaps one of the most complicated but compelling elements of Severini’s
dandyism was his emphasis on his own creative independence and detachment from
convention and authority. Severini was generally vague when it came to his own political
leanings and he repeatedly emphasized his dislike of authority and his unwillingness to
be labeled as part of a codified movement. In his autobiography, for example, he
tries to downplay his association with both the Italian Futurists, whom he considered

\[130\] Ibid., 62.

\[131\] See, for example: Severini, Life of a Painter, 61.
to be raucous and undisciplined, and also with the Cubists, who never fully embraced him. He claims that he “never belonged to ‘the disciplined troop’ [the Puteaux Cubists], perhaps out of an instinctual abhorrence of ‘formulae.’”

As a newcomer to Paris, Severini was at a disadvantage. Not only was he a foreigner but lived a life of constant poverty. Perhaps his adoption of certain characteristics generally associated with the dandy was conceived as a way to navigate his awkward socio-political position. According to Domna Stanton, foreignness was a fundamental ingredient to dandyism and taking on a specific and slightly peculiar character could have allowed Severini to move more smoothly in Parisian circles. The dandy persona itself was a foreign import, having been adopted from Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and thus it was no mistake that Severini chose to adopt the persona. Through its characteristics, as outlined above and discussed further in chapter 5, he could therefore be viewed as a type, more specifically a type with a distinct foreign and Parisian pedigree, instead of as a simple foreigner.

VI. Conclusion

It is clear that Gino Severini tried to model himself on the French historical figures of the dandy and the bohemian, however what is less clear is how well he succeeded in this venture. His history, personality, material circumstances, and the changing nature of society made it such that Severini’s adoption of the composite

132 Ibid., 61. It is important to note, however, that Severini’s attempt to emphasize his indifference to the Cubist cause in his autobiography could be a ploy to make himself seem more anti-partisan than he really was. In his letters from his Futurist period he displays an enthusiastic regard for Cubism and undeniably plays the role of spokesman and defender of Futurism in the French world.

133 Stanton, 14.
stereotype of a bohemian dandy had distinctly different connotations and meanings than in previous decades. While he rejected the popular image of the worker-artist (taken up by Picasso) and instead took up the mantle of an anti-bourgeois dandy (as described by Baudelaire), he does not smoothly fit into this category as a historical construction. As I argued earlier, this time period is where recent theories and categories, such as Mary Gluck’s concept of the sentimental vs. ironic bohemia, begin to break down. While an adherence to the bohemian lifestyle continued to be seen as a rebellion against bourgeois culture, it increasingly took on characteristics of both ‘sentimental’ (an attachment to the world of bourgeois entertainment) and ‘ironic’ (the use of the construction as a disguise) bohemies. Severini makes this distinction problematic as he combines both aspects of the bohemian formula as analyzed by Gluck into his creation of a distinct identity, one that was historically sanctified and culturally stable but also definitively foreign and set apart from both lower-class and bourgeois society.

Instead of relying on categorizations and labels for bohemia at the turn of the century I argue that by this time the term was stripped of its largely counter-cultural significance. Whereas during the previous era the concept of bohemia had strong socially and politically activist import, after the turn of the century the term (and those who adhered to bohemia’s codes) had become largely a fascination for the bourgeoisie. By entering into its boundaries (both those loosely drawn around Montmartre and its more ambiguous cultural borders) the bourgeoisie could take part in a world apart, a kind of social tourism, while never leaving the safety of Paris.

Bohemia was no longer a firm symbol of heroic resistance against society. Instead, it was a myth perpetuated by those who considered themselves bohemian, as a
mask dividing them from their Other, the bourgeoisie. However, the bourgeoisie likewise adopted bohemia in order to draw a boundary (however blurry at times) between themselves and the less desirable aspects of Parisian society. Thus, the use of the term ‘bohemia’ had positive and negative implications depending on who was using it and for what purpose. Regardless of its source, the designation of “bohemian” served all classes as an identifying category with which they could either associate or detach themselves. In this way, bohemia and the bourgeoisie were permanently intertwined. The bohemian, however he might reject them, constantly yearned for the comforts and security of bourgeois existence. At the same time the bourgeoisie was inextricably drawn to the mystery and intrigue of the bohemian lifestyle, specifically because of its otherness. In conclusion, even if the aims and goals, the values and principles held by these two groups of Parisians were almost entirely opposed they were also inextricably linked in the minds and imaginations of those who lived within their boundaries.

One possible explanation for the intertwined relation of bohemia to the culture of the bourgeoisie was the fact that they were born together out of the same forces of modern society.134 Not only did the concept of a fixed bohemian lifestyle emerge in the mid-nineteenth century, but it emerged as a mythic counterpart to bourgeois propriety. Both were equally products of the changing forces of modernity and came out of the fundamental alteration in French society after the French Revolution and the industrial era. Like bohemia, the cultural category ‘bourgeois’ was difficult to define and map. In

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134 The Oxford English Dictionary states that both terms (bohemia and bourgeoisie) entered the English language in the middle of the nineteenth century; 1861 and 1848 respectively (Oxford English Dictionary, http://www.oed.com, accessed January 26, 2009). As for their previous usage in France, although the term ‘bourgeoisie’ came into existence earlier than ‘bohemia’, the concept of a bohemian or counter-culture lifestyle had existed for some time before writers like Henry Mürger gave it a name.
one sense the polarity bohemia/bourgeois was an attempt to define the new segments of society at the moment when they were emerging and threatening the old order.

Romana Severini, Severini’s youngest daughter, disagrees with my characterization of her father as a bohemian. She argues that he had no other choice but to live a bohemian lifestyle since he was poor and a stranger, but it was a lifestyle that he never embraced.\textsuperscript{135} While it is true that he may not have had many choices during his first years in Paris, it is also true that Severini did the best he could with the lot he had been given. Being part of the bohemian community gave him something to belong to and some meaning to apply to his otherwise miserable existence and the slow progress of his work. The fact that he was poor and without options was not, as I see it, incompatible with his decision to adhere to the bohemian lifestyle. Bohemia was a way to romanticize his condition and to diminish the horror of it. It was the perfect mask for Severini to hide behind and to mitigate his less than ideal identity as a poor foreigner in the very cosmopolitan city of Paris. It seems only natural that this would be a very attractive choice for the young struggling artist.

\textsuperscript{135} Correspondence between myself and Romana Severini, Summer 2007.
CHAPTER 2
An Avant-Garde Education

One feels an immense fatigue in the atmosphere. The Salon d' Automne and the Salon des Tuileries, which were the most important exhibitions, do not offer any examples anymore of new guidelines, or of great vitality in already well-known trends… This is what is impairing the achievement of modern and avant-garde art; and harming the high prestige of Paris that could only be achieved by our generation.¹

In this chapter I will explore the artistic, literary, and scientific movements that formed an essential part of Gino Severini’s thinking during the years leading up to his involvement with Futurism. However, my consideration of his actual role in Futurism, the movement to which he nominally belonged after 1909, and his mature work during this period will be dealt with in chapter 4. Here I make the case that despite the stated Futurist claim to “destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind” and thus with them every trace of the past, it is clear that Severini was inspired by the work of those artists who came before him.² Severini’s primary artistic concerns leading up to this time were first informed by Italian Divisionism and then more intensely by French Neo-Impressionist technique and theory. There were also many contemporary ideas and trends that he absorbed during his first years in Paris. His fascination with Symbolism, his


relations with Lugné-Poë’s *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre*, his contact with the poetic theories of Unanimisme, his growing awareness of new scientific discoveries, and his investment in philosophical theories, in particular those of Henri Bergson, undeniably affected his artistic development. This chapter seeks to delineate as clearly as possible the variety of ideas and trends that attracted Severini during these developmental years (those before 1909) as a way to frame subsequent discussion of his ties to Futurism and his paintings of the dancing figure.

All innovation is relative: it is either a continuation or rejection of what has come before. Severini admits this very definitively in his introduction to the catalogue at his 1913 show at the Marlborough Gallery in London by writing: “we [the Futurists] are unfairly accused of severing all connection with tradition. The force with which we rid ourselves of the yoke of the Past and our hatred of that Past, do not prevent our recognizing brethren in every great epoch through which Art has passed. Every expression of Art which possesses true depth bears a natural connection with tradition.”³ With this statement Severini mitigates the violence of Futurist attacks on the past and admits to the fact that all new art possesses a trace of the old. Much later, while writing his autobiography Severini also writes that he views (in retrospect) the project of Futurism as a continuation of Impressionism, while Cubism was a rejection of it.⁴ This statement is ostensibly made to reiterate the Futurist claim that they relied on color and ideas of simultaneity to capture all elements of a particular scene which they contrasted with what they describe as the static, analytic view of Cubism. It also points to a


fundamental fallacy in Futurist theory; that Impressionism was one of the ‘futile’
 attempts of past artists against which Marinetti particularly wanted to react. It is ironic
 that for all Marinetti’s bombastic language concerning his rejection of the past, Severini,
 one of the founding Futurists, would later find in the same movement an indelible
 reliance on previous models.

 Severini himself, although he signed the Futurist manifestoes and openly declared
 himself an enemy of the past, did not practice what he advocated. He recognized in the
 ideology of Futurism, as with bohemia and his self-styled stance as a dandy, a potential
 position from which he could negotiate. In this way he can be considered a poseur. With
 this statement I do not mean to suggest that Severini was in any way a fake. He was
 deeply invested in every project into which he entered, but he was not a committed
 believer or a rote follower of any. From each movement and ideology that he encountered
 he pieced together a complete persona that empowered him to move freely within the
 intellectual and visual avant-garde, a world in which he entered as a very disempowered
 and disenfranchised struggling foreign artist.

 Although this chapter outlines only a few of the many past and contemporary
 artistic movements to which Severini looked, I hope to show that each and every one was
 crucial to his artistic education and development. From Italian Divisionism and then Neo-
 Impressionism he took his original stylistic methods. The divided touch and contrasting
 color theory not only defined his early work, but as we will see, influenced his mature
 Futurist style. From Symbolism Severini took his signature distillation of form into its
 essential elements and the sublimation of the physical body (especially the dancing
 figure) into the general environment. The critic Felix Fénéon wrote that Neo-
Impressionism and Symbolism attempted to create a higher, sublimated reality, suffused with the artist’s own personality and persona. 5 Severini recognized the importance of this for his own work; he was not a copyist of externals, but an observer of the way all elements in an environment fit together to create a singular frame of mind. From Unanimisme he took the creation of a new vocabulary based on the modern experience of the city and popular culture. While the Unanimist poets were not the only theorists of the simultaneous connection and existence of all things, they were certainly some of the first to put these ideas together into a unified theory. 6 The widespread impact of Unanimism on the French and Italian avant-garde before 1909 served to reinforce Severini’s own interest in this movement. Finally, he, like so many artists at the time, found inspiration in the ideas and writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, appropriating his theories of time and memory into both his own writings and visual production.

I. Severini’s Search for Meaning in Paris

In order to fully understand Severini’s native environment and his dissatisfaction with his country’s artistic progress it is important to briefly discuss Italy’s political and economic status at the turn of the twentieth century. Italy, as mentioned in chapter 1, was a relatively new country, fully unified only in 1861. The economy of the new nation had grown rapidly since its unification, but both financial and political power lay firmly in the north. As a result the country was politically unstable, split between north and south and


dominated by regional rivalries. Although Italy was ostensibly a country with a monarchy until its defeat in World War II, the most powerful political player in the land was the prime minister, Francesco Crispi (from 1887 until 1891 and again from 1893 until 1896), an authoritarian with imperial ambitions, but not the support to carry them to fruition. By the end of the 1880s an economic depression had settled over the new country and the humiliating defeat of the Italian army by Abyssinia at the Battle of Adua in 1896 ended serious colonial hopes and with them, Crispi’s government. The fall of Crispi’s government left Italy intellectually and politically divided as well. Conservative, isolationist elements put into power the next prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, a moderate pragmatist who operated by divide-and-rule tactics; he became the hated image of Italy’s weakness for a growing network of radical socialists, nationalists and anarchists. As we shall see in chapter 4, nearly all members of the Futurist movement came out of radical political backgrounds. In sum, Italy was a ripe climate for experimentation not only in the arts but also in its political and social structures.

Gino Severini never publicly committed himself to a political movement, nor left a definitive record of his early political beliefs. Before his involvement with Futurism, he resisted inclusion into any of the politically-charged artistic movements that influenced his early development. When Severini moved to Paris in 1906, he arrived as something of a free agent, involved but not invested in several artistic associations, and still seeking a

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personal style. In his autobiography he wrote about his and his close friend Amadeo Modigliani’s (another Italian transplant to Paris) search for direction, saying:

“I was dissatisfied with the state of my art, and conversations with Modigliani shed little light or clarity for either of us. Moreover, we both felt, in a vague but certain way that it would be damaging to pin things down too precisely. We needed to let the ideas mature naturally. So we went ahead, doing a bare minimum of work, destroying a great deal of our output and struggling to keep our heads above water.”

Severini was frustrated with his progress in art but recognized the need to give himself time to develop independently. This understanding did not, however, help Severini’s (nor Modigliani’s) financial situation in Paris, and they both survived on odd jobs and commissions without producing anything of which they could be proud. Meanwhile, as outlined in chapter 1, Severini was busy creating and shaping an altogether different kind of artwork: his fictional persona. Modigliani undertook a similar project, but his own entrance into French society was complicated by the fact that he was both foreign and Jewish. Instead of turning to popular culture and experimental fashion, Modigliani largely used drugs and alcohol to deal with his inability to fit into Parisian society, which proved a considerably more dangerous path.

The drawings and paintings that remain from Severini’s first years in Paris (between 1906 and 1910) are unmistakably informed by his year of study with Giacomo Balla in Rome and Balla’s knowledge of French avant-garde painting, especially that of the Neo-Impressionists (taken up in 1897). These images primarily depict the physical

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8 Severini, Life of a Painter, 38.

environs of Montmartre and do not yet focus on nocturnal entertainment or dance as a
signature subject. Images such as Primavera a Montmartre from 1909 (fig. 2-1) rely
heavily on Divisionist methods and take as their models the kind of scenes that Severini
would have seen at the Salon des Indépendants and the Impressionist and Neo-
Impressionist artwork displayed in galleries all over Paris.¹¹ This image illustrates
Montmartre as it might have appeared on a warm spring day. Orderly lines, seen in the
railings and tree trunks, and the illusion of sparkling sunlight create a visually pleasing
but rote Neo-Impressionist image, with none of Severini’s future innovation.

This method of painting was one of several types Severini explored during his
first years in Paris. For example, Le Vieux Noceur Parisien from 1906 depicts a character
study reminiscent of Daumier’s caricatures and those of other Realist artists discussed in
chapter 1, but in an updated style with notable expressionist elements (fig. 2-2).¹² This
experiment in style was related to Severini’s experiments in forming his persona.

Severini references the model for this drawing in his autobiography saying that:

“across the hall, behind the door facing mine, lived a very strange old
man, a real vieux noceur, always dressed in a cutaway and striped paints, a
high, stiff wing-tip collar folded down at the corners and a rigid hat
slanting over his right eye. His suit was threadbare, the undefinable color
of dust, as was his shirt. With his ever-vivacious, lustful eye (he still wore
a monocle), his drooping lower lip and falling jowls, he was a marvelous
subject.”¹³

¹⁰ Marianne Martin states also that before Futurism Severini was very caught up in Manet’s style with its
large, unmodelled planes and strong contrast of light and dark (77). I maintain that Severini’s similarity to
Manet was a product of international tendencies, for he never mentions Manet as being a particular
inspiration nor is there any proof that the two artists ever met in person. See also Fraquelli, 17.

¹¹ Severini had just missed the retrospective of Georges Seurat in 1905 at the Salon des Indépendants, his
self-stated ‘master,’ and knowledge of this retrospective may have been one factor that led to his decision
to move to Paris.

¹² See chapter 1, figures 1-1 and 1-2.
This image and description, as well as being proof that Severini was intently alert to Parisian ‘types,’ are also interesting for their underlying admiration for the subject. Although “his room was a hovel and his bed a foul funk” this was a man who had created a recognizable identity for himself even among the unusual characters of Montmartre, a project similar to Severini’s own.\textsuperscript{14}

The artist also created other kinds of graphic works during this period, including journal illustrations. Many of Severini’s Parisian colleagues regularly did illustrations and humorous caricatures for journals such as the anarchist \textit{L’Assiette au Beurre} and \textit{Le Rire}. Severini mentions this fact in his autobiography, naming some of the artists who regularly contributed to these (and other) journals (including Louis Marcoussis, Juan Gris, Jacques Villon, Demetrios Galanis and others) as a way to supplement their income, but says that he never attempted “that sort of work; I thought myself wholly incapable of it.”\textsuperscript{15} Considering the evidence to the contrary, we know that this is not true. While Severini did not make a regular practice of publishing graphic works in journals, he certainly tried his hand at their stylistic methods and contributed on many occasions to Aurélien Lugné-Poë’s journal \textit{l’Oeuvre}. (discussed below). During his earlier years in Rome he was also a regular contributor to the socialist literary review \textit{Avanti della Domenica} (fig. 2-3). That he so adamantly denies this type of work in his memoirs is curious and can be explained in two ways: the first is that Severini did not remember

\textsuperscript{13} Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 30

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 35.
(purposefully or not) his attempts at caricature and the second is that in his autobiography, as we have seen in numerous other places, he specifically detached himself from any reference to contemporary politics and preferred to remain cautious about his political associations, at least until 1913, when he contributed to the anarcho-individualist journal *L’Action d’art* (although this too might have been less about politics and more about making a living).\(^\text{16}\) Published work in these journals would have connected him to these political tendencies, which were certainly not in vogue when the autobiography was published in 1946.

**II. Italian Divisionism and Symbolism**

Like many of his fellow Futurists (most prominently Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni as well as Mario Sironi) Severini fell under the spell of Italian Divisionism (and its accompanying Symbolist theories) during his formative years in Italy. Unlike France, where proponents of Divisionist technique grouped together and became known as members of one movement (Neo-Impressionism), the Italian practitioners never unified. It is only in the last few decades that scholars have recognized Italian Divisionism as an independent tendency and devoted critical attention to it.\(^\text{17}\) However, even in recent explorations of the subject, such as the 1990 volume *L’età del Divisionismo* edited by Gabriella Belli and Franco Rella, there is a general confusion over whether Italian Divisionism can claim its own heritage or if it was merely an offshoot of French Neo-


Impressionism. I take the position (following Simonetta Fraquelli) that while Italian Divisionism did grow out of artists’ increasing knowledge of foreign tendencies, artists in Italy took these origins and transformed them into something distinctly Italian. Thus, Italian Divisionism and French Neo-Impressionism were interdependent but separate practices.

Divisionism in its Italian form first appeared on Milan’s art scene in 1891 with Gaetano Previati’s masterpiece Maternità (fig. 2-4). Aside from Previati, the most important practitioners of Italian Divisionism were Giovanni Segantini and Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. These artists had all traveled to Paris and seen examples of Neo-Impressionism. However, their works largely differed from that of the Parisians in that the Italians mixed Divisionist technique with Symbolist subjects, using the effects of scintillating light and color to convey emotional, political, and spiritual relationships. The success of this project is made obvious by Previati’s Maternità being shown at the Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris in 1892, an exhibition organized by Joséphin Péladan, who preferred a more traditional stylistic approach to painting combined with strong occult associations.

Previati (like many others before and after him) wrote a long artistic treatise that influenced the younger generation of artists immensely. This was eventually published by Bocca of Turin in two separate volumes: La tecnica della pittura (1905) and I principi

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18 Fraquelli, 11.

19 The subject of Maternità has a strong Symbolist pedigree and was a powerful theme in Umberto Boccioni’s early development, as was the work and technique of Giovanni Previati.

20 Taylor, 113.

21 Aurora Scotti Tosini, “Divisionist Painting Techniques,” in Fraquelli, 27.
scientifici del divisionismo (1906). These were followed, in 1913, by Della pittura, tecnica ed arte. The explanation of painting techniques and the different qualities of pigments and other materials in these treatises was very precise. He identified three major stages in technique: impasto (application of paint), velatura (unification of tone), and divisione dei toni (‘division’ or separation of tones). However, Previati’s theories of technique were not just questions of practice. The technique used was only a tool for externalizing the inner, spiritual contemplation of great ideals. It enabled the painter to attain a diffuse luminosity and a limitless vibrancy that pervaded the painting and purportedly conveyed an emotional effect to the spectator. Previati’s technique differs in many ways from that of the Parisian Neo-Impressionists, most notably in his use of markings of a variety of sizes and shapes in order to create directional emphasis in his compositions, reinforcing their emotional and social agendas rather than giving them a purely ocular nature.22

The importance of Italian Divisionism for the development of Futurism cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Although the Futurists were very aware of innovations taking place outside Italy, they claimed the Italian Divisionists as their predecessors in the pursuit to free Italy of its backward artistic traditions. Many of the Futurists’ ideas came from those already being practiced by the Divisionists. The idea of putting the spectator in the center of the painting, a central tenet to Futurism, for example, can be connected to Previati for whom the space and light of a painting were infinite (in theory) and burst from the confines of the frame.23

22 Gaetano Previati, La tecnica della pittura (1905); I principi scientifici del divisionismo (1906) and Della pittura, tecnica ed arte (all published by Bocca editore, Torino).
In the 1910 Manifesto of the Futurist Painters the artists ask why Italian Divisionism has not been more recognized by Italian cultural leaders. They write:

Ask these priests of a veritable religious cult, these guardians of old aesthetic laws, where we can go and see the works of Giovanni Segantini today. Ask them why the officials of the Commission have never heard of the existence of Gaetano Previati. Ask them where they can see Medardo Rosso’s sculpture, or who takes the slightest interest in artists who have not yet had twenty years of struggle and suffering behind them, but are still producing works destined to honor their fatherland?24

This statement is the only time in the entire manifesto when painters of a previous generation are recognized by name and complimented.25 A recognition of the Italian Divisionists in general is further strengthened in the Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto from later in 1910: “painting cannot exist today without Divisionism… Divisionism, for the modern painter, must be an innate complementariness which we declare to be essential and necessary.”26 It is significant that in February of 1910, just as these manifestos were being drafted, Previati’s work was on display at the Palazzo della Società per le Belle Arti in Milan.

Young Italian artists generally adapted Divisionist technique in an instinctive rather than scientific manner, in keeping with the Symbolist tendencies of their predecessors. They focused not on the object-dissolving aspect of Divisionism as it was

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25 While the sculptor Medardo Rosso was generally seen (by the Futurists) as a practitioner of an outdated Symbolism, he shares the honor of being one of only three artists from the previous generation about which the Futurists spoke favorably.

practiced by the Neo-Impressionists, but more on the energy and physical movement believed to be generated by the technique of dividing colors. Thus, building on Henri Bergson’s philosophy (discussed in more detail in chapter 4) they saw abstract energies within the divided colors that kept even still-lives from appearing to be inert objects. Italian Divisionism also bore a relationship with related Symbolist ideas of music and rhythm (also described in more detail below). In a 1910 article Leo Mezzadri wrote of Previati’s work as containing “true sounds, that vibrated across the varied lights, colors, shadows, in the canvas.”27 As we will see, these ideas radiated throughout Europe leaving no artistic or poetic movement untouched.

III. French Neo-Impressionism vs. Italian Divisionism:

While Severini clearly admired Divisionist techniques, he did not laud the previous generation of Italian artists in the same way as his colleagues, particularly Boccioni.28 Instead, as we have seen in chapter 1, when he ceased to be excited by the art practiced by Giacomo Balla and other painters in Rome, Severini looked to the French masters and to the Parisian avant-garde. He did not forget his early lessons in Divisionism but his judgment about Italian art in general was decidedly negative. Reflecting on his early exposure to Italian modernism Severini wrote that “in Italy the


28 Although the importance of Previati and the other Divisionists in Futurist development has not yet gained much attention in English scholarship, its influence on Boccioni’s artistic oeuvre, especially after 1906, is well laid out in Maurizio Calvesi, “Boccioni e Previati,” in Rivista di Critica e Storia dell’Arte (Jan-March 1961) and Ilaria Schiaffini, Umberto Boccioni. Stati d’animo. Teoria e pittura (Milano: SilvanoEditoriale, 2002). However, it is interesting to note that in a letter to Severini from Boccioni in 1907, Boccioni questions the validity of the Italian Divisionist technique and writes: “It amazes me that you have found in Segantini enthusiasm for Fornara who I find an imitator however courageous. And Previati? What impression has he given you? I too have had an impression of a seriousness that is missing from at least many of the French” (MART Sev.I.3.2.2).
habit of obeying an optical and superficial realism kept the painter within the limits of
description, outside of true poetic creation.” Further, Severini argued ‘that the technique
that [Balla] taught us… permitted me to succeed fairly well in landscapes, but when I
treated the figure, these things seemed much more difficult.”29 Thus the tools of
Divisionism were not adequate to the young artist for the study of the human body in
particular. About Italian Divisionism’s admirable qualities he is less certain. He writes in
his autobiography: “the few seriously gifted painters such as Segantini, Previati,
Morbelli, and some others used Seurat’s Divisionism as a technique for rendering
naturalistic effects, which could have been achieved even without Divisionism. The only
one to use the technique of Divisionistic colors for poetic ends was Pellizza da
Volpedo.”30

Severini’s most unequivocal statement on his preference for Neo-Impressionism
over Italian Divisionism comes from his autobiography, where he writes:

“In my opinion, it was Seurat who first and most successfully established
a balance between subject, composition, and technique… Signac, Cross,
and others were closely associated with Seurat, but I chose Seurat as my
master for once and for all, and would do so again today.”31

Thus, as mentioned previously, Severini’s primary (stated) goal in transferring to Paris
was to further his knowledge of Neo-Impressionism, specifically the work of Seurat. In
his memoirs Severini also makes a distinction between his own championing of French
Neo-Impressionism, which found compatibility with the Bergsonism (discussed below)

29 Severini, “Processo e difeso di un pittore d’oggi” in L’Arte, n. 5 and 6, Roma, September-November
1931, 416.

30 Severini, Life of a Painter, 16.

31 Ibid., 35.
of the pre-war Cubists and with the culture of Montmartre, and the Milanese Futurists’
adherence to the technique of Italian Divisionism. Although he does not further clarify
this statement at this time he does say that the distinction would prove to be important to
future critics writing on Futurism.\textsuperscript{32}

What are we (as those future critics) to make of these statements? Clearly
Severini is again separating himself from his fellow Italian Futurists who remained in
Italy, and allying himself ever more closely with the Parisian avant-garde.\textsuperscript{33} It is also
interesting to note that this portion of the text did not appear in the original version of
Severini’s biography, but was added to the second edition. I believe that with this
statement Severini is trying to make a case for his own Frenchness (which gained ever
more importance as the years wore on) versus the foreignness of his Italian colleagues.
According to the artist, he was the only Futurist who truly understood the importance of
Parisian culture and the very influential ideas of Bergson. His Milanese compatriots were
too far removed from French culture to truly grasp these ideas. However, Severini also
separated himself from the French avant-garde by saying in his autobiography:

When I arrived in Paris, I was amazed to find that Seurat was
underestimated by the other artists. They preferred Cézanne, who also had
original ideas about composition and technique, but who looked to the past
for his examples; I never found his famous phrase, ‘faire du Poussin sur
nature’ particularly exciting or convincing. These themes were the topics
of our discussions; only Léger and Delaunay, whom I met later, were more
or less of the same mind as I was.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{33} In his autobiography he also states: “In Italy, Boccioni and Balla understood, but did not fully
appropriate the difficult techniques of Divisionism, nor the puzzling harmony between Realism and
Romanticism that Seurat expressed in such a simple, but efficient manner.” (Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 35)

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Clearly the artist saw himself as unique among the avant-garde in grasping the true value of French Neo-Impressionism and made it his mission to study the unpolluted ideas of its practitioners without “foreign” interference.

The term “Neo-Impressionist” was coined in 1886 by the Symbolist critic Félix Fénéon to describe the work of Seurat, Signac, Camille Pissarro, and his son Lucien displayed at the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition. For the first time, these artists were all displayed in a separate room together, dominated by Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte*. Fénéon saw something different in these artists’ paintings that signaled a turn away but also a continuation of past Impressionism in the artists’ adherence to simple forms, division of tone, and a carefully regimented touch. The movement eventually grew to include Albert Dubois, Charles Angrand, Louis Hayet, Henri Edmond Cross, Léo Gausson, Hippolyte Petitjean, and Maximilien Luce.35

To many historians Georges Seurat has become known as the creative leader and pioneer of Neo-Impressionism (although that fact was not universally accepted at the time) while Signac was the organizational and theoretical head.36 For example, Signac held a salon in his studio regularly beginning in 1884 that included many literary figures, philosophers and scientists. Unlike Seurat, who was reportedly somewhat of a loner, Signac was a sociable artist who developed lasting friendships within the contemporary literary world.

Seurat was a notoriously difficult character and there began to be tension in the Neo-Impressionist ranks as early as 1888. Signac and Pissarro saw Seurat as excessively

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scientific and academic, while they allied themselves more to the Symbolists poets and were self-declared anarchists. As a result, Seurat drifted away from the other Neo-Impressionists, working in his own personal style until his untimely death in 1891. However his inspiration and ideas continued to provide much material for contemporary artists. For example, there was a retrospective of his work in 1908 at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. Nearly the entire avant-garde community of Paris saw this exhibition, Severini included, and found in it inspiration for current artistic trends. Apollinaire, who at this point was a staunch supporter of the Cubism of Picasso and Braque also saw in the Neo-Impressionism movement the same tendency to renounce the object—albeit with different techniques.

There are multiple ways in which Neo-Impressionism has been theorized by both its associates and contemporary scholars. The most common interpretation of the movement focuses on its adherence to scientific or ‘pseudoscientific’ rules. This is the interpretation of Neo-Impressionism first developed by William Innes Homer in 1964 and holds that the dotted technique was used as an optical illusion of light. This thesis was updated in 1987 when John Gage argued that the goal of Seurat’s painting was not to reproduce light but to create fields of color that appeared finely divided up close but emerged also as unified and harmonious when the viewer backed away from the image.

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37 Daniela Fonti, The Dance, 15.

38 Ibid.

39 In saying that Neo-Impressionism has been theorized in several different ways, I do not mean to argue that each method is exclusive of the others. Neo-Impressionism was a complicated movement and several tendencies existed contemporaneously among its adherents.

The basis for this interpretation can be found in Charles Blanc’s *Grammar of the Arts of Design* (read by Seurat during his school days), which held that artists should order nature into an elevated form of expression and thus allow it to take on a moral function. Delacroix’s theories on color (discussed in more detail below) and the French translation of Ogden Rood’s 1879 *Modern Chromatics* were important in helping the Neo-Impressionists to formulate their color theory. Rood’s text included ideas and theories from scientists and critics, such as German theorist Hermann von Helmholtz’s differentiation between color as pure light and color as pigment and most importantly Michel Chevreul’s theories of an aesthetic harmony created through contrasting and complementary colors. Chevreul writes of this contrast not only as an optical illusion but as having a psychological dimension. This idea was further developed by Signac’s friend Charles Henry, a French scientist and philosopher whom the Neo-Impressionists met in 1886. Building on Chevreul’s work and that of von Helmholtz he developed a theory called psychophysics which attempted to unite science and aesthetics by linking human evolution to aesthetic pleasure. He divided color and form into two categories: ‘dynamogenous’ and ‘inhibitory’. Dynamogenous forms such as those that combined warm colors with upward leading diagonal forms brought pleasure and expanded consciousness; inhibitory forms did the opposite. Thus, John Gage argues that by 1886...

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43 Signac even provided diagrams and plates for Charles Henry’s lectures and books from 1888-90.

44 In 1910 Chevreul wrote his doctoral thesis in two parts (Sensation et énergie and Mémoire et habitude) and was appointed director of the Laboratory of the Physiology of Sensations at the Sorbonne.
the Neo-Impressionists had a color theory that combined theories and ideas from the variety of sources mentioned above into an integral and coherent color theory.

Perhaps the best example of the use of these theories in a Neo-Impressionist work is the 1888 canvas *Le Chahut* by Georges Seurat (fig. 2-5). This image (displayed at the 1908 retrospective), along with Seurat’s paintings of street and circus performers, had an indelible effect on Severini in terms of their subject matter, however, they also were significant for their application of the theories of Henry and others to a contemporary subject. For example, in *Le Chahut* the structure of the image, with its ascending diagonal lines (seen in the dancer’s legs, eyes, mouths, as well as in the inclination of the double bass) expressed gaiety according to Henry’s theories. The divided touch and pure pigments spoke to Rood and Chevreul’s idea of complimentary and contrasting colors. Finally, the warmth of the colors used in the painting are in keeping with the pleasure brought on by a dynamogenous color scheme.

Another interpretation of Neo-Impressionism addresses the movement’s political affiliations. This aspect of the movement has been analyzed by Robin Roslak and Anne Dymond, who examine the close relationships between the Neo-Impressionists and prominent anarchists in France, such as Jean Grave and Félix Fénéon, in several articles from the early 1990s. Roslak, in particular, building on Eugenia and Robert Herbert’s

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45 Le Chahut was a dance similar to the can-can.

1960 work on unpublished Neo-Impressionist letters, compares the Neo-Impressionist world view to anarchist socio-political concerns in that they appropriated a common vocabulary from the laws and processes of chemical science and philosophy to describe a society (or painting) in which each individual detail was in perfect harmony with every other element. This provided the Neo-Impressionists with a metaphorical means of relating their artistic praxis to their political beliefs. Anne Dymond also states that there was also a strong current of classicism within the avant-garde traditions of these artists. This classical tendency was manifest by the use of the pastoral tradition to critique contemporary society from a radical perspective—specifically a form of utopian nostalgia that resisted the modern world. As Dymond insists, however, in its most sophisticated form, this utopian vision recognized that classical imagery was indelibly a part of the modern world and offered a model of how modern life might employ the best of both past and present.

It is important to note that while Signac, Fénéon and other artists such as Pissarro openly proclaimed their allegiance to anarchism, Seurat remained enigmatic about his own political affiliations. Therefore, Severini’s choice to ally himself with Seurat (significantly calling the older artist his ‘master) is another sign of his reticence when it came to the anarchist dimension of both Neo-Impressionism and the anarchist roots of

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Futurism. Also, Seurat was dead by the time Severini arrived in Paris (although his work was very still much in circulation), while Signac remained a prominent figure on the art scene. So again, Severini’s insistence that Seurat was his ‘master’ was yet another way that the young artist distanced himself from politicized practitioners of the style, such as Signac.

Anarchists such as Grave yearned for a harmonious relationship between individual human beings and society as a whole, with one equally responsible for the well-being of the other. They sought to achieve a cohesive, classless social milieu in which the essence, autonomy, and well-being of each member were preserved at all times. This social ideal finds its aesthetic parallel in Neo-Impressionism, particularly in Signac’s belief that aesthetic harmony in painting had a real connection to general public harmony and more importantly moral harmony. Thus aesthetic harmony became a vehicle through which Neo-Impressionist artists could express this moral harmony. The Neo-Impressionist thought that the law of complementary contrasts wherein discrete dots of color would optically reinforce each other to create an overall aesthetic harmony, constituted an aesthetic and idealized metaphor for social relations in a future anarchist society.

Both the Neo-Impressionists and the anarchists also shared a deep faith in science as the foundation of their respective aesthetic and social systems. The anarchists’ natural laws and vocabulary were often taken from chemical science while the Neo-Impressionists and critics associated with the movement used similar terminology. In sum, both believed in a world where discrete parts were combined in an organized manner and functioned smoothly and predictably according to stable natural laws.
Roslak’s 2007 book gives several examples that reinforce the fact that the anarchist message was integral to Neo-Impressionist technique. However, again it is important to remember that Severini chose not to idealize the artists who were specifically attempting to illustrate anarchist ideas but instead looks to the more ambivalent paintings and theories of Seurat.⁴⁹

Perhaps Severini’s most important exegesis on the technique of Neo-Impressionism was his *Black Cat* of 1911, previously discussed in chapter 1. The technique used in this early painting very much shows the influence of Neo-Impressionism. The artist took care to separate each dab of paint applied to the canvas. This technique has often been discussed by scholars, but what has been ignored is the fact that Severini directly applied his paint to a bare, unprimed canvas. Although this is difficult to distinguish in reproductions, an analysis of the actual canvas itself makes it clear that this technique adds a sense of immediacy to the work. This painting combined Neo-Impressionist technique with Symbolist ideas, particularly with the idea of a painting emerging out of the soul of an artist. Therefore while the technique clearly derives from Neo-Impressionism, the subject and its aforementioned literary sources (the stories of

⁴⁹ Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism*. Note: A third method of interpreting Neo-Impressionism was put forth by Paul Smith in his 1997 book *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*. Smith argues against a purely scientific reading of Seurat’s work, positing instead that Seurat’s work was directly derived from his reading of Charles Blanc and his Academic training (thus Idealist and Neoplatonist in nature—positions which were ultimately incompatible with a belief in Positivist science and also with true left-wing politics). After 1886, when Seurat grew distant from Signac and other Neo-Impressionists, his work was promoted by Teodor de Wyzewa (as well as Paul Adam and Gustave Kahn) who held that Seurat and his colleagues used a divided and colored touch, like the *vers libre* Poets used rhythm, assonance, and pitch, in imitation of Wagner’s techniques, or as ‘musical’ signs that would express particular states of consciousness. Smith argues that Seurat’s continued recourse to the Neo-Impressionist technique of complementary colors did not signal an allegiance to its scientific underpinnings, but simply to a technique that proved compatible with his own idealist and symbolist associations.
Edgar Allan Poe, much admired by the Symbolists) and folk symbols, connects it undeniably to Symbolism.

IV. The Revival of Symbolism:

As we have seen, it is extremely difficult to completely separate Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism. Many of the same critics were involved with both movements: for example, Félix Fénéon, Gustave Kahn, Paul Adam, Emile Verhaeren, and Jean Ajalbert all wrote enthusiastically about Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism. These men of letters were all intimates of the Neo-Impressionist painters and at times acted as their spokesmen. Specifically, the Symbolist critics found in Neo-Impressionism’s idealism the same stripping away of casual and accidental features to reveal the ‘essence’ of a form. Thus, for these critics, Neo-Impressionism rose above the superficiality of Impressionism and created the pure Idea that was at the heart of Symbolism.\(^{50}\)

The literary movement of Symbolism was first announced in a manifesto entitled ‘Le Symbolisme’ written by the Greek immigrant Jean Moréas and published in 1886 in *Le Figaro* (an act which surely served as a model for F.T. Marinetti’s publication of his Founding Futurist Manifesto in the same paper 23 years later).\(^{51}\) This manifesto had a huge effect on the literary world but was also highly influential on the visual art world in Paris. Many Symbolist critics saw both Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism as a


\(^{51}\) Jean Moréas ‘Le Symbolisme,’ *Le Figaro*, 18 Sept 1886.
visual complement to Symbolist writing, making the theories of the two movements
difficult, and sometimes impossible, to distinguish.

Although more than two decades passed between the founding of Symbolism and
the advent of Cubism and Futurism, many turn-of-the-century artists attracted to Neo-
Impressionism and its break with tradition also found a renewed interest in Symbolism.
As Albert Gleizes wrote in 1912: “the Symbolists were once again in vogue.”52 Although
he was referring specifically to Cubism’s ‘rediscovery’ of the movement, they were by no
means the only avant-garde group that recognized the importance of Symbolism for a
new type of art and literature. For example, F.T. Marinetti found the poetic pursuits of the
Symbolists absolutely integral to his own poetic career in that its practitioners were the
first to break free of traditional syntax. Knowledge of Symbolism’s project led to the
Futurist leader’s own experiments and also those of other writers connected to or admired
by the Futurist movement, such as Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars (discussed in
connection with Unanimisme below).53

These connections were not always positive. For example, Umbro Apollonio, in
his Introduction to a publication of the Futurist Manifestoes, uses this combination of
Symbolism and Divisionism in a negative fashion when he implies that despite their
claims to the contrary the Futurists were mired in Symbolism, Art Nouveau and
orientalism, art movements of the past that impeded the stated modernity of the
movement.54 Likewise in a 1912 letter between Franz Marc and Vasily Kandinsky, Marc

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52 Albert Gleizes, “Les Débuts du Cubisme,” in Jean Chevalier, Albert Gleizes et le Cubism (Stuttgart,
1962), 53–68.


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comments that the titles of Futurist pieces reminded him of Japanese poems, further connecting them to past art forms.\(^{55}\) Thus, for all Futurists’ bombastic writing and pontifications against the past, the movement continued to draw on artistic forms that were already sanctioned by the art world and provided a base from which the new Italian movement could project its controversial ideas. Much later the Futurist painters would also seek to incorporate a Symbolist dissolution of syntax into their paintings and into their written material, the most extreme example being Carrà’s attempts to transfer Marinetti’s words-in-freedom poetry to canvas in works such as his collection of war paintings and poetry, *Guerrapittura* (fig. 2-6)

The impact of Symbolism on Severini’s art was not as overt as it was in the art of his Milanese colleagues, despite the existence of paintings such as *Black Cat* and as *La danseuse obsedante* both of 1911 (further discussed in chapter 3). By the time the Futurist movement began to gain ground in 1910 most of its adherents were already working, as we have seen, in a style that was a particular blend of Divisionist technique and Symbolist ideas. Umberto Boccioni was perhaps the most prominent example of this mixture. For example, Boccioni met Previati sometime between 1907 and 1908, and immediately embraced the latter’s combination of Divisionism and the poetic tendencies of Symbolism.\(^{56}\) His series *States of Mind* (fig. 2-7) clearly show a Symbolist influence in his desire to depict the psychological impact of travel. However, this series has been dwelt on too much by scholars as one of the artist’s masterpieces, most prominently by

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54 Apollonio, Introduction, 12.


Marianne Martin and Ilaria Schiaffini. It is better considered an experimental series that actually had very little to do with Boccioni’s future production.

Severini, by contrast, moved to Paris specifically to study the work of Seurat and Signac in order to leave behind these Italian trappings of Symbolism. This is not to say that Severini’s early work, and even that of his Futurist years, had no connection to Symbolism, but rather that his particular admiration of Symbolist work was more in line with Cubist views on Symbolism and his own study of the common origins of Symbolism and French Neo-Impressionism. Severini’s Symbolism had more to do with his association of painting with music and a predilection to believe that different colors corresponded with various moods and movements, a project similar to that of Seurat and Signac. While Severini had a seemingly less scientific rationale behind his choices he did come to associate different colors with different types of movement and dances.

Many of Severini’s assumptions about Symbolism and also Neo-Impressionism came from his reading of Paul Signac’s 1899 treatise ‘From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism.’ This manifesto on the theory and technique behind Neo-Impressionist painting was meant to situate the Neo-Impressionists within a historical continuum that stretched back to Delacroix. Signac saw in Delacroix a break with tradition that was an inspiration to him and he also wanted to show that the hostility directed towards the Neo-Impressionists by critics and the public was no different than what greeted Delacroix and

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57 Ibid. and Marianne Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory*.

58 This volume was given to Severini by Raoul Dufy when they lived next to each other at 5 Impasse Guelma beginning in 1910 (Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 209). Signac’s treatise is reproduced in F. Cachin, ed. (Paris, 1964). This treatise was also republished in 1911 (likely just after Severini received it), but its popularity was such that even before this there was almost no artist who had not read and internalized Signac’s ideas.
the Impressionists when they first began working. According to Signac these reproaches are inflicted on all artists who have the courage to innovate.

In “From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism” Signac lays out the theories and technique behind Neo-Impressionist painting. Signac’s text described the effects of an optical mixture of pure colors, the separation of diverse elements of light and color (divisionism), the balance and proportion of these elements (which took place in accordance with the laws of contrast, gradation, and irradiation), and the appropriate choice of a regular brushstroke that fit the dimensions of the painting. All of these techniques were aimed at achieving a maximum of color and light in the painted image. According to Signac, Delacroix experimented with these techniques, recognizing the advantages of applying scientific laws to painting, adherence to the laws that govern color (as they were then understood), working with optical mixture and abolishing muddy, dull colors, but he was unable to achieve the luminosity and vibrant color that he desired.

The Impressionists took up his project and simplified their palette to achieve a more intense effect. Signac then pulls all three efforts together by saying that the comma-shaped stroke of the Impressionists is just the hatching of Delacroix reduced to a smaller scale, one that eventually became the divided touch of the Neo-Impressionists. However, the failing of the Impressionists, according to Signac, was that they did not maintain absolute respect for the purity of the colors they used and often muddied them. Also, the Impressionists supposedly depended on instinct and a spontaneous response to the motif while the Neo-Impressionist technique advocated by Signac was premised on intellectual reflection in an effort to create a sense of permanence.
The Neo-Impressionists, writes Signac, had been able to refine the previous techniques and bring a unique sense of harmony to their paintings. Their canvases purportedly idealized the raw data of nature by adapting lines, chiaroscuro, and colors to fit their intention, thus subordinating color and line to the emotion the painter seeks to render and striving to recreate light in its ideal form instead of blindly copying it.

In sum, Neo-Impressionism presents the fusion and development of the doctrines of Delacroix and the Impressionists, combining their ideas into a system that, while strict, also allows for the individual touch of the artist. Signac counters the criticism that Neo-Impressionism is too scientific and influenced by the reigning Positivism of the time saying that a basis in science can only serve to strengthen their art. However, instead of allowing technique to dictate their results, the Neo-Impressionists, states Signac, make their knowledge serve their intentions. Throughout the entirety of Signac’s treatise the painter uses many musical analogies to support his theories, drawing parallels between the process of an artist and a composer (and again drawing attention to their admiration for Wagner). These analogies were particularly significant for Severini and gave him the theoretical basis for incorporating music and rhythm into his painterly vocabulary. In the young painter’s work, color also leads to emotional and also musical associations.

As we shall see, Severini took much from the theories of Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism. Aside from a firm connection to music and rhythm he linked himself to the Symbolist precept of calling on the viewer to project him or herself into the painting. The personal participation of the viewer is needed to complete the painting, to make it meaningful. They must visualize the scene and use their imagination to make all the
disparate parts fit together (hear the music, see the movement, associate with the colors) into a unified ensemble.

**V. Le gosse de l’Œuvre:**

In 1907, after the first of many evictions for failing to pay his rent Severini found a small room at 22 rue Turgot, directly across from the offices of Aurélien Lugné-Poë’s theater the *Théâtre de l’Œuvre*. Lugné-Poë’s theater, founded in 1890 (with the assistance of Camille Mauclair and Édouard Vuillard), took up the banner of Paris’ avant-garde production space from the ‘Prince of Poets’ Paul Fort’s (Severini’s future father-in-law) previous *Théâtre d’Art*.59 The *Théâtre d’Art* had been made famous by promoting such avant-garde figures as Paul Verlaine, Paul Gauguin, and Maurice Maeterlinck and itself built on the tradition of avant-garde theater, art, and literature that stretched back to Rodophe Salis’ *Chat Noir* cabaret. Lugné-Poë’s *Théâtre de l’Œuvre* worked hard to continue this venerated Montmartre tradition. Beginning with its premier in 1892 the theater prided itself on being one of the most experimental venues for theater in Paris and Lugné-Poë’s theater often showcased controversial plays by Symbolist playwrights and major foreign writers, including Henrik Ibsen, Maxim Gorky, Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gabrielle D’Annunzio, Alfred Jarry (who served for a time as Lugné-Poë’s secretary), and even Marinetti, among many others.60 The theater also showed other exotic programs, such as the Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala* in 1895 and experimental avant-

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garde dance (which curiously seemed to consist entirely of the dance of Isadora Duncan—discussed in more detail chapter 3).

The young artist quickly made friends with Lugné-Poë, whom he describes as “a large bald man with a huge nose who looked like a comedian or monk (fig. 2-8).”\(^6\)

Through this chance encounter Severini renewed his interest in theater (which had so delighted him as a youth) and made himself a constant fixture at the theater’s rehearsals and performances, even coming to be known by the name “le gosse de l’Oeuvre”, or “the Oeuvre kid.” In his autobiography Severini wrote that in the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre “I found an unexpected outlet… for my former theatrical instincts, not that I wanted to become an actor myself… but I took an active interest and was very curious about the théâtre in general. I went to all the rehearsals and all the performances.”\(^62\)

Despite the above statement, Severini seems not to have met Marinetti when he came to Paris in April 1909 to produce his controversial satirical tragedy Le Roi Bombance (a nod to Alfred Jarry’s own play l’Ubu Roi from 1896) at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre (fig. 2-9). Both Marianne Martin and Daniela Fonti maintain that he did not meet the poet on this occasion but legitimize their reasoning only by inferring that since Severini does not mention the play in his autobiography then he must not have seen it.\(^63\)

This is curious since Severini already knew about Futurism from the publication of its founding manifesto in Le Figaro 20 February 1909 and through conversations with

\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Martin, Futurist Art and Theory, 77; Fonti, The Dance, 12.
Lugné-Poë (who had been in regular contact with Marinetti since at least August 1908) and would likely have been curious about the bombastic Italian poet. Whatever the situation, it is true that Marinetti’s visit to Paris in 1909 had little to no effect on Severini. It was not until the following year, when Boccioni sent Severini the text of the *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, that Severini wrote a letter to Marinetti mentioning the fact that he was just then reading the script of the poet’s play.

His relationship with Lugné-Poë proved fortuitous in other ways, however. Lugné-Poë directed potential buyers to Severini and when times were really difficult for the artist he worked for the set designer in the theater (even though the theater had by that time ceased to employ avant-garde artists to design its sets and instead catered to the tastes of the more general public). Severini remembers this as an act of extreme kindness since he wrote that “[his] work was rarely of any use to the designer as it was very clumsy indeed.” Around 1909 he also began to contribute etchings and drawings to the magazine *L’Œuvre*, published and edited by Lugné-Poë. As mentioned before this represented a break with the style that the artist was pursuing in his painting and these small designs were likely done as favors to the publisher and as a way to earn a bit of external income. For the most part these images were done in a definitively Symbolist

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64 There are at least 13 letters from either Lugné-Poë or his secretary to Marinetti conserved in the archives of the Getty Center in Los Angeles referring to the publication of *Ubu Roi*.

65 Letter from Gino Severini to FT Marinetti, 17 May 1910, preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 135.


68 Fonti, 13. Around this same time Severini dedicated and gave Lugné-Poë a Self-Portrait in thanks for his support.
and illustrative style, specifically in their sinuous curvilinear forms and focus on timeless and idealized figures (such as the Renaissance poet Buonaccorso da Montemagno who was known for his humanist and highly symbolic poetry). (figs. 2-10 and 2-11). This style would be unrecognizable by most people familiar with Severini’s other works.

However, Severini’s presence in the journal was significant and cannot be dismissed as occasional piecework. For example, issue number 13 from November 1909 was illustrated exclusively by Severini (except for the cover image that showed a small design by Paul Iribe as was customary for nearly all covers of the journal). Lugné-Poë also wrote a short article entitled “L’Atelier d’un camarade” (figs. 2-12 and 2-13) for this issue featuring Severini’s painting Avenue Trudaine (fig. 2-12), a work which the author declared signified a break from the shackles of his Italian Divisionist past and showed the artist’s complete assimilation of a ‘freer’ version of Neo-Impressionism (à la Signac).69

Lugné-Poë also introduced Severini to a great many critical figures connected to the avant-garde, which ultimately aided the artist in integrating himself into the Parisian artistic community. Perhaps most significantly, Lugné-Poë introduced Severini to the anarchist Félix Fénéon, the French critic most closely associated with the Neo-Impressionists and the former editor of the Symbolist journal La Revue Blanche (from 1895-1903).70 Fénéon was then the secretary of the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. Although in his biography Severini admits that he did not fully understand the importance of the Théâtre de l’Œuvre as a gathering place for the Parisian avant-garde and was not yet in a

position to take advantage of Fénéon’s acquaintance, this contact proved particularly fortuitous several years later when the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery hosted the Futurists’ first major exhibition in Paris in 1912.

Frequenting the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre during Severini’s crucial pre-Futurist years arguably gave Severini, who was already fascinated by theater and dance, a further appreciation for the ‘total performance’ or gesamtkunstwerk that was often the aim of Lugné-Poë and his collaborators. All elements of a performance—costume, set, machinery, make-up, lighting, sound, etc.—worked together in this concept to create the maximum emotional involvement of both the audience and those on stage. This was a concept that was first introduced in Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’Art and his experiments in the ‘synaesthetic involvement of the spectator. For example, in a production of P.N. Roinard’s Song of Songs in 1892, Fort arranged for the entire auditorium to be invaded by scents in the hope of heightening the emotional response of the viewer. These types of experiments and their constant discussion among the members of the avant-garde certainly had a profound impact on Severini and filtered into his Futurist paintings of the total spectacle of the dance-hall.

The fact that Lugné-Poë’s theater promoted only one dancer, Isadora Duncan, is curious. The first issue of the theater’s journal includes an advertisement for a performance by the dancer (which ironically was at another theater) and Lugné-Poë was always very quick to quote other journalists in reinforcing that his theater was largely responsible for Duncan’s success in Paris. He also devotes at least two issues over the

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71 Severini, Life of a Painter, 45.

72 Fénéon was in charge of a section of the Bernheim-Jeune gallery devoted to contemporary art.
four years of publication of the *Bulletin de l’Oeuvre* to Duncan and her style of dancing
and often reproduces the programs that she presented at his theater.\(^{73}\)

In some ways Lugné-Poë’s promotion of Duncan provided a model for his
attempts to further the career of Severini. Severini is first mentioned in the November
1909 issue of *L’Oeuvre* (number 13) and at the beginning of this publication it is clearly
stated that the entire issue is illustrated by Severini. This is also the issue in which the
‘anonymous’ article (signed ‘P’) by Lugne-Poë himself entitled ‘L’Atelier d’un
Camarade: Gino Severini’ appeared. From November 1909 to March 1911 Severini’s
caricatures and art nouveau style graphics are evident in nearly every issue of l’Oeuvre
(often they are reprints from previous issues, but signed by the artist nonetheless).
Another significant contribution by Severini was his caricatural drawing of the popular
Italian actor Ermete Zacconi (fig. 2-14). This illustration is accompanied by a note by
which reads:

> The great Italian artist will give Paris, under the auspices of ‘L’Oeuvre’
> and under the artistic direction of M. Lugné-Poë, a series of performances
> beginning on 14 January 1911. These acts will take place at the Théâtre
> Antoine and will be there for six nights, includes performances such as
> Hamlet, Les Spectres, La Nouvelle Idole, Othello, a comic piece, etc.\(^{74}\)
This is an interesting statement as it is not only a plug for Severini, but also for Lugné-Poë, the Théâtre de L’Oeuvre, and yet another experimental théâtre. Lugné-Poë, at this point, seems very sure that Severini will become a superstar like Duncan and he makes sure that his public knows that he was the impresario who first discovered the foreign artist.

VI. Unanimisme

Another major influence on Gino Severini was the French movement known as Unanimisme, a poetic movement named after Jules Romains’ seminal work La vie unanime from 1908. This book of poems, written between 1904 and 1907, was first published by the Abbaye de Créteil, of which Romains was a member. Significantly, this volume constitutes one of the earliest expressions of literary simultaneism, in which Romains was influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and his notion of élan vital to create an artistic vision of the modern city (discussed below). As Bergson’s élan vital bound all living things together so Romains’ unanimisme connected the individual to the greater collective consciousness of the metropolis. A quote from Romains exemplifies this:

The attraction of the passerby is hardly physical any longer, these are no longer movements but rhythms – or the théâtre – the noise, the odor, the moistness, the breath, come together to fill the illuminated space…; the

75 The connection between Unanimisme and Futurism was first sketched out by Marianne Martin in 1969: “Futurism, Unanimism and Apollinaire,” Art Journal, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring, 1969), 258-268. Martin’s article (although dated) points out broad similarities in the writings associated with both groups but does not mention Severini’s work as one of the foremost examples of this connection.

76 The Abbaye de Créteil was a utopian group founded in 1906 by Charles Vildrac and René Arcos, which brought together Poets and painters with similar beliefs in the interconnection of all things. It was highly influential on artists of the time, especially Puteaux Cubists such as Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes (who was a founding member of the Abbaye).
limbs and nerves and muscles of all work to forge the great and unique joy. And the individual dissolves…. 

These ideas fit in perfectly with Futurist ideas about the future of humanity in the urban environment.

Severini, perhaps influenced by Marinetti’s early acquaintance with the ideas of the Abbaye, strove to translate this collective consciousness into a pictorial form, using fragmented objects and panoramic images in which all elements fuse together as one. Perhaps it is easier to demonstrate this effect by examining two of Severini’s paintings, Printemps à Montmartre from 1909 and Le boulevard from 1910. Although stylistically extremely different, the basic subject of both paintings is the same. Printemps, as we have seen, shows a typical street in Montmartre rendered in a Neo-Impressionist technique while Le boulevard depicts a similar street as it might have appeared through the lens of a Unanimist, Futurist or Cubist influence (fig. 2-15).

In Le boulevard Severini has taken the peaceful scene of Le Printemps and transformed it into an image of a bustling Parisian street in which the collective rhythms of urban life make it difficult to distinguish individuals and their surroundings. The figures in this painting are rendered faceless so as to suppress any individuality and instead share the experience of the city as a unifying phenomenon, in which there is a utopian universal sympathy between life, existence, and humanity. Severini was not the only Futurist to be influenced by these ideas. Carlo Carrà’s interest in Romains was inspired in part because of the poet’s anarchist leanings (which echoed Carrà’s own

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politics), while Boccioni also found the simultaneity of urban life extremely beneficial to his paintings of city life in Milan.

The theories of Unanimisme also affected the stylistic structure of the painting. *Le boulevard* is cut through by geometric lines that can be seen to radiate as a series of triangles from the top of the canvas. Severini had used this triangular and geometric technique before in *Le chat noir* and *Danseuse obsédante* and it would continue to be one of the chief dynamic components of his compositions during his early Futurist years (see chapter 3). Severini’s emerging abstract vocabulary fragments the figures of the street in such a way as to make them seem to melt with the kaleidoscope energy of the urban environment. However, it is not only the human figures on the street that are treated this way. The background shows trees, buildings, and what could only be the upward slant of the boulevard into the Butte at Montmartre. All of these elements are likewise fragmented and bend in toward the street and the figures in it, encompassing all elements of the scene into a singular and unified composition – almost as if we are looking at the scene through a curved lens of a camera. The color scheme, also, helps to unify the composition. The natural elements of the scene (sky, trees, hills) are painted at prisms of bright light that lend their brilliance to the darker figures in the street below, thereby spreading the energy of the atmosphere throughout the entire painting.

**VII. Bergsonism:**

In *Le boulevard* Severini is not only responding to the theories of Unanimism but also those of Henri Bergson and his concepts of simultaneity and *durée*. Although there were numerous connections between the many avant-garde movements discussed above
and their overlapping boundaries made it difficult to decipher who belonged to which
tendency, one of the primary points of connection between these groups was their interest
in the theories and ideas of the French philosopher Bergson. This dissertation is not the
appropriate place to discuss Bergson’s entire oeuvre and its influence on the avant-garde
at the turn-of-the-century, and thus I will confine my discussion to those aspects of
Bergsonism that particularly impacted the work of Severini and his use (and deliberate
misuse) of them in his theoretical writings and in his paintings.  

Bergson’s first major text, *Time and Free Will*, was published in France in 1889
and through subsequent publications, lectures, and prominent public positions he became
something of a celebrity. Bergson’s popularity reached international heights following his
1907 publication of *Creative Evolution*. At this time he was teaching at the Collège de
France and his lectures there became so popular that not only were people standing, but
there was also a crowd in the street trying to see and hear through the windows. This
was a sign of how far-reaching Bergson’s influence had become and how integrated it
was into the everyday life and thought of not only artists and writers, but also the
educated bourgeoisie.

Bergson himself never endorsed any particular artistic movement, but his ideas
(often misunderstood) were nevertheless extremely influential. Bergsonian notions of
*intuition*, *élan vital*, and *durée* are especially worth exploring for their parallel usages in
avant-garde circles. Bergson distinguishes between two forms of time in his influential

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79 For a more complete discussion see Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*.
80 Ibid.
work *An Introduction to Metaphysics*: pure time and mathematical time.\textsuperscript{81} Pure time is equated with real duration, which is heterogeneous, continuous, and indivisible. Mathematical time can be broken down into segments or intervals. The intellect can only make sense of mathematical time and attempts to decompose all temporal experience into an ordered series of events. According to Bergson this action only falsifies duration and thus the intellect can never experience real duration, which is only discernible by means of intuition, an empathetic form of consciousness.\textsuperscript{82} Intuition was necessary to inspire creative insight and to access the true nature of things, which was lost in the rational modes of thinking identified with the intellect.

Bergson’s philosophy of ‘becoming’ stressed the primacy of intuition over intellect and became a watchword for both Marinetti and his followers and avant-garde groups in Paris. Bergson states in *Matter and Memory* (1896) that every movement leaves traces, which continue to affect all subsequent physical or mental processes. The events of the past collect in the fibers of the body as they do in the mind and determine the elaboration of the idea of an organic persistence of the past in the present.\textsuperscript{83} This statement is particularly useful in examining Severini’s paintings. Although a work of art will never give a “faithful representation of duration” (defined by Bergson as the true nature of time), Severini’s image, *Travel Memories* from 1911, appears to be a visual representation of his personal understanding of Bergson’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. *Travel Memories* is a simultaneous image that gives the idea of place, time,

\textsuperscript{81} Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), reproduced in the book *The Creative Mind* and translated into Italian as early as 1909.


\textsuperscript{83} Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 195. See also Sutton 451, and Antliff 53.
and figures unified in the space of the canvas do evoke the memory of travel (fig. 2-16). The scene has a centripetal rhythm and recalls Severini’s journey from his parents house in Pienza, symbolically evoked by the medieval well, church and bell tower, to Paris, by way of a train, an icon of modernity. Severini does not use the cubist method of interpenetrating planes but adopted a spherical space, dilated and distorted that recalls the work of Delaunay.

**VIII. Conclusion**

In closing it is important to note that even in 1913 ‘time’ and particularly the ‘Past’ (as discussed in the beginning of this chapter) had a very nationalistic quality for Severini (and presumably for his fellow Futurists). In the Marlborough Gallery catalogue he writes that “there is to my mind, but one artistic tradition among the painters of the West: that of Italy. It is to the Italian tradition that the most advanced painters of our day, from Cézanne, to the Cubists are attached. Whether in the work of Greco, Rembrandt, or Ribera, the solidity of the modeling, the aristocratic sobriety of the tones, and the balance of the values are altogether Italian.”\(^{84}\) While Severini then critiques Matisse and the Cubists for distorting the Italian tradition through their singular focus on line and form, he does allow that their work has some merit by virtue of referencing the Italian masters.

In his autobiography too, Severini writes that in his opinion the bourgeoing Futurist movement would have been much more successful in the face of its French counterparts had its practitioners moved immediately to Paris. He writes:

In my opinion, they should have left Milan and moved immediately to Paris, even at the risk of starvation. First, because they needed it and they should have realized their need to investigate the serious problems posed by art and to link them to an art that was becoming progressively more European. They also needed to learn more about our immediate predecessors. Second, because Paris, as they had already had occasion to see, was the international center of the art world. It was where everything converged morally and materially.\(^\text{85}\)

Futurism did not need to exist only in Italy to be Italian. As Severini says: “One can be ‘Italian’ even at the North Pole.”\(^\text{86}\) Thus the Futurists, in Severini’s view, missed out on a crucial opportunity to make a lasting impression on avant-garde art (in retrospect it has done so in any case) by being mired in Italy and thus unable to escape the very past they bombastically shunned.

\(^{85}\) Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 94.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

The Dance

On exiting from the bowels of the underground railway on the Place Blanche one sees immediately the sails of the Moulin Rouge that glow incandescently, it is almost a feeling of being vomited from the mouth of a beached whale into a luxuriant and demonic Eden.¹

Although in fashionable bourgeois Parisian circles the 18th arrondissement of Montmartre carried the reputation of debauchery and illicit pleasures, this did not stop traveling foreigners, those from the French countryside, and even the aforementioned bourgeois from visiting the district and taking advantage of its curious pleasures. Often these visitors, such as the writer of the above description, Lionello Fiumi, were both drawn to and repulsed by the illicit reputation that the Moulin Rouge and other locales of popular entertainment in Montmartre had built and were also intent on maintaining. In dance and music halls such as the Moulin Rouge, bourgeois patrons, avant-garde artists, and curiosity-seekers from all walks of life found the most complete expression of the dynamism and simultaneity that were synonymous with the development of modernity itself.²

The popularity of nocturnal entertainment, both vernacular and more avant-garde, in Paris (and throughout Europe) stretches back well into the nineteenth century, and requires a detailed history that has been thoughtfully examined by previous scholars.³ At

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¹ Lionello Fiumi, Li ho vedut i a Pari gi (Milano: 1960), 11. Translation mine. This quote is taken from Fiumi’s memoirs of his first visit to Paris before World War II (published as a collection in 1960).

² Throughout this section and the rest of the dissertation I use the words dance- and music-hall interchangeably. Although there were subtle differences between them that I will clarify later in this chapter the lines between the two are often blurred and did not seem to connote an important difference in the eyes of (most) contemporary observers.
the moment of Severini’s relocation to Paris, however, this world was becoming increasingly commercialized and subsumed into mass culture, in a manner similar to what was happening to bohemia. As the twentieth century wore on, the production of culture in Montmartre gradually passed from small time entrepreneurs to professionals (often part of the bohemian and avant-garde world themselves), and its nocturnal locales began to center around high profile advertising, profit margins, media coverage, sensation, and scandal. Although the casual observer might not have been conscious of this shift, it placed Paris at the center of a changing world in which modernity and commerciality were inextricably linked.

This chapter examines the relationship between avant-garde artistic and literary circles and the culture of dance performance in Montmartre, specifically focusing on the artistic production of Gino Severini between 1910 and 1914, the years in which the image of the dancing figure formed the central theme in his art and life. I propose an analogy between the forms and techniques used by the artist and the technical and popular innovations of dance productions. I will also seek to discover why there exists a significant lacuna in the literature on popular entertainment and dance-halls. Literature considering Montmartre’s nocturnal venues has often focused on the avant-garde world of the literary cafés and cabarets in the 1880s and 1890s or else the world-wide

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popularity of Paris’ largest dance-halls, such as the Moulin Rouge and the Bal Tabarin in the 1920s and 1930s. Between the 1880s and 1914 there is a drop in scholarly interest in Montmartre and its locales of popular culture and a general belief in the district’s growing lack of importance for the production of new culture. On closer inspection Montmartre’s artistic and popular appeal continued to thrive and attract artistic souls from all over the world. The turn-of-the-century was a time of transition and, as was explained in the first chapter on bohemia, its locales of popular culture and their effect on the avant-garde require new modes of investigation and understanding.

I. Invitation to the Dance

In the 1 July 1914 edition of the Florentine journal *Lacerba* there is a drawing by Gino Severini entitled *Danza Serpentina* (fig. 3-1). This particular title would have brought to mind the avant-garde dance practices of Loïe Fuller, an American dancer who became an international superstar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (fig. 3-3 and 3-4). For a painter who had largely made his name painting dancers and dance-halls this title seems appropriate. There was just one problem: the artist did not choose the title. Severini had originally labeled the work *Danzatrice = mare* and had given it the subtitle of “*Studio o tentativoe di Letteratura pittorica o Letteratura-pittura*” connecting it more with his work in analogies and general images of dancers (figs. 3-1 and 3-2).

These words connected the drawing to his latest area of research—plastic analogies

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4 The word ‘Serpentine’ had become a generic term by this time referring to Fuller’s style of dancing in general and was not necessarily a reference to her particular dance of that name (as it had originally). There was also a sense that the ‘Serpentine Dance’ had connections to other orientalist performances that were undoubtedly picked up by both Severini and Fuller. Carol Duncan, *Ingres’s Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

5 Daniela Fonti, *Gino Severini: Catalogo ragionato* (Milano; Arnoldo Mondadori editore, 1988), 185.
(discussed in more depth in chapters 4 and 5)—and Severini believed that without this title the image was just a pointless jumble of words and images.

However, the editors of *Lacerba*, in conjunction with the Futurist leader Marinetti, decided against his will to give the drawing the title *Danza Serpentina*. According to the scholar Marianne Martin, the new title was specifically meant to evoke Loïe Fuller’s dancing to a public already familiar with her work. While neither Martin nor any other scholar has explored the reasons behind this editorial alteration, I suggest that this simple act of changing the title would have been a strategic maneuver for the Futurists in Italy. The re-titling of the drawing not only connected the visual material (as long as one didn’t look too closely) of Severini’s drawing to contemporary events and trends in Paris, thereby promoting the international nature of *Lacerba* and also, perhaps more importantly, signaling Marinetti’s authoritarian efforts to control the group.

Although several scholars other than Martin have made connections between Severini’s compositions and Fuller’s performances, the paucity of direct references to Fuller in Severini’s writings and artwork make it challenging to show a direct correlation. However, I argue that the dancer and the painter were responding to and

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7 This was further confirmed when Giovanni Lista reproduced Severini’s drawing in his book *Loïe Fuller: Danseuse de la Belle Epoque* (Éditions Stock: Paris, 1994), p. 420.

8 According to Günter Berghaus and others, all manifestos, images, and activities had to be approved by Marinetti. Acting truly as the Futurist ‘chief’ he maintained tight control over the members of his group. Severini was a bit of an outlyer to this. Living in Paris, Marinetti’s controls affected him less than it did the other Futurists and after following Marinetti’s advice on exhibitions (such as not entering the Armory exhibit in the US and not exhibiting with the Indépendants) he began to forge his own alliances (such as setting up a one-man show at the Marlborough Gallery in London) perhaps angering Marinetti.

9 See, for example, Daniela Fonti, *Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916* (Milan: Skira editore, 2001); Ted Merwin, “Loïe Fuller’s Influence on F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist Dance” in *Dance Chronicle*, v. 21 no. 1
experimenting with the same intellectual currents, unequivocally shown in the case of *Danza Serpentina*.

Loïe Fuller was known and admired for her innovations in stagecraft and costuming as much as for her dance performances themselves (figs. 3-3 and 3-4).¹⁰ She did not just choreograph the moving body, but she choreographed space – empty space to be exact. She stripped the stage down to its bare elements, often cloaking it in black velvet to restrict reflective surfaces, and created theatrical space only through light and movement. Her white silk skirts became more and more voluminous until she floated and flowed over the stage, almost seeming to defy the laws of gravity. Many of her costumes were created out of hundreds of yards of fine, diaphanous silk, sometimes dyed to match the colors of a rainbow but more often left white to create a blank screen on which multiple incandescent projectors could create light shows. In many ways, Fuller used both light and the silk of her costumes as sculpting mediums.¹¹

As Fuller danced, light, color, and fabric were fused into a single visual image unthreatened by distracting stage sets or spatial grids. For example, in many of her dances Fuller added mirrors to multiply her image, causing her actual body to disappear in a

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maze of illusion and duplicates (figs. 3-5 and 3-6). Marinetti was specifically drawn to this aspect of Fuller’s dance, although we do not know for sure if he saw Fuller herself perform. The Futurist’s own ideal sense of art and theater was one in which human bodies did not exist at all and instead disappeared into machine, light and electricity. Fuller’s performances fractured the human body in a way that is very similar to Severini’s images of dancers. The Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé also recognized in Fuller the realization of his ideal theater: no scenery, no words, a place where space and time had no importance and where reality would not intrude between the idea and the audience. He wrote in his Consideration on the Art of Loïe Fuller from 1893 that:

her performance, *sui generis*, is at once an artistic intoxication and an industrial achievement. In that terrible bath of materials swoons the radiant, cold dancer, illustrating countless themes of gyration. From her proceeds an expanding web – giant butterflies and petals, unfoldings – everything of a pure and elemental order. She blends with the rapidly changing colors which vary their limelit phantasmagoria of twilight and grotto, their rapid emotional changes – delight, mourning, anger; and to set these off, prismatic, either violent or dilute as they are, there must be the dizziness of soul made visible by an artifice.14

From the last years of the nineteenth century until the First World War Fuller was a cultural phenomenon and her iconicity permeated and influenced a wide variety of

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12 Fuller spent her life plagued by copycats. In fact, when she arrived in Paris in 1892 there was already a dancer performing her creations at the Folies-Bergère. Although she quickly did away with this particular case of mimicry, her style of dance was spread throughout Europe and America by a large number of acts promoting themselves as either the dancer herself or one of her relatives. Margaret Haile Harris, ed. *Magician of Light*, exhibition catalogue (Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum, 1979), 18. In this age of internet videos there are several devoted to Loïe Fuller (and her copyists): see for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1rnFrDxjlk (ostensibly Fuller herself), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNXNfEo5dQ&feature=related (a famous copyist named Annabelle), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDUn-VK4MJQ&feature=related (a copyist performing in Bologna).


14 Quoted in Sommer, 58.
cultural practices (fig. 3-7). For example, more than seventy artists depicted Fuller throughout the length of her career. Some of the most notable included Georges Seurat, whose parallel research into color and light may have been an inspiration to Fuller; Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Jules Chéret, whose three posters of her completed in the 1890s are some of the most memorable of many representations of Fuller (fig. 3-8). Fuller also cultivated close relationships with Rodin and with Mallarmé, who not only wrote extensive reviews of Fuller’s performances (quoted above) but immortalized her in an 1893 poem after seeing her at the Folies Bergère. She also became good friends with Pierre and Marie Curie and throughout her life displayed a deep interest in the newest scientific discoveries.  

Although Fuller’s spectacular career was winding down by the time the art of the Futurists and Cubists reached maturity, I argue that both she and surrounding artists associated with new avant-garde trends were responding to similar developments and theories in science and philosophy in the creation of their work. For Mallarmé’s poetry

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15 Interestingly, Fuller was also the subject of an astounding array of knick-knacks and souvenirs. Among the most remarkable of these commercially produced items were a porcelain lamp by the Austrian Paul Teresziuk, a line of stoneware created by Clément Massier and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, and numerous bronze figurines. These items were distributed throughout Europe, following Fuller as she toured and could also be found at the department store le Printemps and at the Folies Bergère (which never missed an opportunity to profit from its performers). This move to capitalize on Fuller’s success in a material fashion is testimony to her widespread appeal and also points to the same fundamental shift that was taking place within the world of the avant-garde at the turn-of-the-century.

16 There is also a political dimension in Fuller’s work discussed by Elizabeth Coffman. She had slippery national allegiances—to the US, to France, and to Romania (where she allegedly had a long term love-affair with Princess Maria), to name a few. This transnationalism appealed to the Futurists who, although very caught up in their own nationalism, were well informed and curious about the ways in which different countries played against each other. Elizabeth Coffman, “Women in Motion: Loïe Fuller and the ‘Interpenetration of Art and Science’ in Camera Obscura 49, vol. 17, n. 1 (2002); 93.

17 Although there is no existing evidence that Severini either attended a performance by Fuller or ever met the dancer, Fuller continued to tour Europe, dancing and innovating through the 1920s (even experimenting with filmmaking towards the end of her life). Aside from his familiarity with Mallarmé’s and Marinetti’s admiration for Fuller, Severini must have been aware (and possibly viewed) one of her many copycats in
and Severini’s painting, the dancer became synonymous not only with cosmopolitan life and the ever-changing modern world but also with what Bergson defined as the ‘elan vital’ of the era. The philosophy of Bergson, in particular his notions of intuition and durée was another shared interest between Fuller and Severini. The experience of Fuller’s performances, I would argue, appealed to the viewer’s sense of intuition in the same way that Severini’s paintings did. The lights, color, movement, and sound were all focused on breaking down a viewer’s sense of rational, or mathematical, time and transporting them into a state where intuition took over and their true experience of duration could be grasped. Cut off from the everyday world, the viewer became caught in a dreamworld, a phenomenon recognized by the critic Camille Mauclair who wrote that “Loïe Fuller tears us away from the conflicts of ordinary life, and leads us to the purifying landscapes of dreams.”

Severini’s canvases are convincingly interpreted by Fonti and other scholars as studies of the way a dancer’s body dissolves under the beams of electric stage lights. As Severini’s work on the dance matures, his figures became increasingly dematerialized

Paris as they were seemingly commonplace in most variety shows. He also must have read about her as she was constantly publishing or being interviewed in Parisian newspapers: for example, “Le théâtre de Loïe Fuller”, Le Théâtre 4 (11 August, 1900), Covielle, “Danse, musique, lumière, chez la Loï Fuller,” Éclair (5 May 1914), and Roger Marx, “Une renovatrice de la danse” in Le Musée (1 March 1907). See also Camille Mauclair’s Idées vivantes: Rodin, Carrière, Sada Yacco et Loï Fuller (Paris: Librairie de l’art ancien et moderne, 1904); Loï Fuller, Quinzans de ma vie, preface by Anatole France (Paris: F. Juven, 1908).

18 Loïe Fuller, “Comment je créai la danse serpentine” in Fantasio, 1908 (this was a clipping that I found in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and included no information as to what journal it had been taken from: 8-RO-12112; I found the same clipping at the Musée de Montmartre with only the notation that it had been taken from the journal Fantasio). In this short article she reflects on her ‘discovery’ of the possibilities of silk. She uses a language that is very Bergsonian in its description of the sudden discovery of the language of her medium and how she awakened to something primitive, unconscious, and unintentional in that moment.

19 Mauclair, Idées Vivantes; quoted in and translated by Garelick, 90.

20 See primarily works by Daniela Fonti and Giovanni Lista.
and dissolve into disembodied color and shape. For example, in *Dancer in the Light*, from 1913-14, the individual planes that should make up the dancer’s body instead fragment and shatter, reacting as if they were refracting light off of a reflective costume and the moistness of the dancer’s skin (fig. 3-2). In the very Bergsonian *The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism—Futurist Manifesto 1913* (discussed further in chapter 4) Severini writes, “all sensations, when they take artistic form, become immersed in the sensation *light*, and therefore can only be expressed with all the colors of the prism.”

This is an effect very similar to what Fuller was aiming for in her experiments using colored lights and mirrors to refract and fragment her physical form. In her 1914 interview with Covielle she reiterates these very same ideas saying that:

> “I want to create a new form of art, an art complexly irrelevant to the usual theories, an art giving to the soul and to the senses at the same time complete delight, where reality and dream, light and sound, movement and rhythm form an exciting unity… I try to follow the musical waves in the movements of the body and in colors; I am trying to create a harmony between sound, light, and movement.”

By the time Severini would have been introduced into Fuller’s circle of admirers, the dancer was nearly fifty years old, and while she had never been the tall and slender sylph that posters and drawings intimated, she grew ever more corpulent in her later years. As a result her body was no longer as appealing as it had once been and she increasingly choreographed dance pieces that downplayed bodily physicality and

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22 Covielle, interview with Fuller, 1914.

23 Current, 5.
sexuality. Instead, these later dances transformed Fuller into an embodiment of universal forces that were both desexualized and de-eroticized. She shrouded herself in ever-larger swaths of flowing cloth, disguising her body in a cloud of swirling fabric and colored lights, often disappearing altogether. Her body no longer took precedence, but was dissolved within the overall experience of her performance, giving itself over to the manipulation of light, color, and movement (fig. 3-9).

Severini’s own move towards increasing abstraction in his art echoes this transformation. The body of his dancer becomes more and more difficult to find in the swirling colors and fractured shapes. The dancer becomes, like Loïe Fuller’s own body, a point of departure for experimental analogies and visual inventions. Severini may have drawn inspiration from Fuller as a dancer whose innovative techniques simultaneously lent themselves to Symbolist interpretation and an embrace of technological modernization. It was this dual sensibility that Severini brought to the spectacular world of the dance hall.24

II. Paris and the Dance

The locales of popular entertainment (primarily cafés, cabarets, music- and dance-halls) that Severini frequented – all clustered in the liminal world of Montmartre – played a significant role in the artist’s daily life, forming the nucleus of the environment in which he lived, worked, and enjoyed himself (fig. 3-10).25 However, his interest in the

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24 Fuller also mediated the relation between the avant-garde and popular culture by virtue of performing at venues like the Folie-Bergère, well known to Severini.

25 Dance-halls did exist and thrive in other areas of the city, but the atmosphere of Montmartre, as we have seen, gave the development of nocturnal entertainment a specifically more illicit nature that clearly
dance-hall as an artistic theme took several years to develop fully and it was not until around 1910 that the figure of the dancer made its way into the work of Severini in a systematic way. From 1910 to 1914 the subject of the dance dominated Severini’s artistic production. Though dancers continued to appear sporadically in his work up until the 1950s, 77 of the artist’s approximately 212 paintings and sketches produced during his Futurist years refer specifically to the dancing figure, while another 45 refer to the surroundings of Montmartre.26

Although Severini allegedly frequented many of the most famous sites of popular entertainment in Montmartre, the majority of his paintings do not have titles that refer to a specific locale. Of his Futurist works, only three refer to the Bal Tabarin in their title, two major paintings (plus five assorted studies) exist of the Monico, and one each survives depicting the Moulin Rouge, Pigalle, Grelot, Variété, and the Café Américain (an all-night restaurant and club, not properly a dance-hall). In this way it appears that Severini is trying to convey the entire atmosphere of popular entertainment in Montmartre instead of linking himself to any one specific place.

26 Personal count taken from Daniela Fonti, Gino Severini: Catalogo ragionato (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, 1988). The remaining images from Severini’s Futurist period are generally portraits, with approximately 25 later paintings devoted to World War I (as per Marinetti’s call for war paintings in 1914).
In his autobiography Severini details the cabarets and cafés that he and his fellow artists frequented, and goes further to convey his own specialized knowledge of Montmartre’s music- and dance-halls:

“I began to frequent the dance-halls and so-called nightclubs more assiduously: Moulin de la Galette, Bal Tabarin, and, further into the night, the after-theater restaurants such as the Royal Souper, Rat Mort [fig. 3-11], Monico, etc. They were expensive but, being a good dancer, I soon was admitted free and received special favors in all of them.”

From the time of Severini’s relocation to Paris in 1906 to the First World War the artist immersed himself in the nocturnal world of popular entertainment, taking an interest in the world of dance long before the subject appeared in his work. At this same time he was also trying to find a niche for himself in the marginalized society of the Montmartre-based bohemian avant-garde, as I discussed in chapter 1. These two activities were not unrelated. As I explained in chapter 1 the sites of popular culture in Montmartre and the ability of these locales to transform quotidian life were at the heart of bohemian desires and practices. As a result Severini was simultaneously participating in multiple overlapping layers of Parisian culture and it was largely through this participation that he was able to create a distinctive and suitably off-kilter persona for himself.

The Parisian’s attraction to nocturnal entertainment long predates Severini’s arrival. Between 1830 and 1848 Paris experienced the rise of a vibrant consumer culture.

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27 Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 53. In his autobiography Severini is notoriously vague about the ‘special favors’ that he received in dance-halls and elsewhere. I do not want to read too much into this vagueness, but other Futurists write very frankly about the sexual and illicit nature of these locales (see, for example, Boccioni’s 1906 letter) and it seems unlikely that Severini would have significantly different experiences. I find a much more convincing argument for this reluctance to align himself with the culture of prostitution and drugs a result of the years between his Futurist days and the writing of his autobiography, his complete change of religious and social ideals, and the fact that his devoted wife, Jeanne Fort, played a large part in helping him edit and transcribe the text for his autobiography.
(cafés, department stores, leisure activities, etc.), and the related and simultaneous growth of popular entertainment. The expansion of these new activities had to do in part with new work laws, the creation of unions, and the emergence of the new middle classes, but it was also partially due to demographic and social changes within the city. According to art historian Robert Herbert the city’s population in 1886 was around 2,345,000—three times the number of residents in 1831. This growth only increased (though at a slower rate) and by 1906 the city boasted some 2,763,393 residents. While some of this new population was a natural result of better living conditions and increased birth rates in the modern era, it was also affected the arrival of a huge number of immigrants into Paris, both from other countries and from outlying French provinces. By 1872 7.4% of Paris’ population had been born outside the city. Many of these incoming residents were single and from the lower classes, attempting to better themselves in the less traditional society of Paris. This population boom, the related dissolution of traditionally organized communities, and the anxiety caused by the new and faster pace of life in the city incited

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28 Although popular dance had a place in Italian culture, it did not go through the same exponential growth and never fostered popular locales that equaled those in Paris. Instead, traditional popular dances continued to thrive while more fashionable society looked to France (its fashions and leisure activities) as the apex of modernity. Thus, I focus here on Parisian venues, while recognizing that while Italian popular culture did attempt at times to copy French, its general history took on an entirely different form that lies outside the boundaries of this study.


30 Herbert, 59.

31 The population of Paris reached its historic peak of 2.9 million in 1921, more than the current population (2,125,246 at the 1999 census). http://www.demographia.com/db-paris9099.htm (September 15, 2009).

32 Herbert, 59.
a crisis in traditional forms of identity,\footnote{Kern, 110} and made Paris, as Robert Herbert calls it, “a city of strangers.”\footnote{Herbert, 59.}

Instead of basing social status on birth and birthplace, as was the norm in the Ancien Régime, social standing was increasingly judged and filtered through consumer culture, specifically visibility.\footnote{For more information on the rise of consumer culture during the July Monarchy and later see: Rosalind H. Williams, \textit{Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Michael B. Miller, \textit{The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869-1920} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Daniel Roché, \textit{Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionelles (XVII-XIXe siècle)} (Paris: Fayard, 1997).} New classes emerged and society became less structured, increasing the amount of leisure time available to people of all classes. Residents who could not necessarily afford the more obvious markings of wealth (such as the increasingly popular automobile) actively sought out other public locales in which they could spend their newly gained free time. These sites of leisure, whether cafés, dance-halls, parks, country inns, or racetracks, were open to all residents and were places where a new leveling of society was most visible. Traditional ways of signaling social standing, such as clothing, free time, and spare money were no longer adequate to distinguish between classes. Foreigners like Severini took advantage of the ambiguity of these traditional markers of status to create a niche for themselves within a newly developing culture.

While an in-depth examination of the history of Parisian locales of popular entertainment lies outside the boundaries of my project (and has already been thoroughly explored by other scholars), a brief discussion of the development of nocturnal
entertainment in Paris with an emphasis on its particular attraction to Severini will greatly assist subsequent examination of his works.\textsuperscript{36} The café was one of the first and the most important sites for the interaction of Parisians from different social strata in a public arena. Cafés emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a place where it was possible to order a drink and perhaps a simple meal, but quickly exploded into centers of Parisian culture and remained open around the clock. Cafés were also places in which one could see and be seen: a ‘neutral terrain,’ that was particularly important to immigrants and foreigners.\textsuperscript{37} With the help of the leveling effect of café culture, non-natives such as Severini could navigate their way more easily through Parisian life, establishing themselves in the open environments of cafés and dance-halls without drawing attention to their status as foreigners.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} For more on the history of the café see, for example: Mariel Oberthur, \textit{Cafés and Cabarets of Montmartre} (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984); W. Scott Haine, \textit{The World of the Paris Café: Sociability Among the French Working Class, 1789-1914} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw, eds. \textit{The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905} (Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey, 1996); Harold B. Segel, \textit{Turn-of-the-Century Cabaret: Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Cracow, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Zurich} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and Robert Herbert’s excellent book \textit{Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society} (1988). For more information on Parisian dance-halls see: Jacques Pessis and Jacques Crépineau, \textit{The Moulin Rouge}, translated by Andrew Lamb (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990); Pascal Sevrn, \textit{Le Music-Hall Français de Mayol à Julien Clerc} (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1978); André Sallée and Philippe Chaveau, \textit{Music-hall et café-concert} (Bordas: Paris, 1985); François Caradec and Alain Weill, \textit{Le café-concert} (Paris: Atelier Hachette/Massin, 1980); and Piero Pacini, \textit{Moulin Rouge and Café-Concert: Manifesti e grafica 1884-1904} (Firenze: Cantini, 1989). It is important to note that with very few exceptions (ie. Herbert, Cate and Shaw, and Haine) texts on the café have been limited to a discussion of the history of the locales themselves. In all research consulted on dance-halls and café-concerts this is also true. There is very little to no discussion on how these institutions played a part in greater Parisian society and in the world of the avant-garde specifically. It is my intention with this current research to rectify this and to highlight only those aspects of Parisian nocturnal entertainment that had a indelible draw for the avant-garde and specifically for the Futurists and painters such as Severini.

\textsuperscript{37} Herbert, 65. There was a large difference in the cafés of the Left Bank and Montmartre as opposed to the fashionable upper-class cafés of the Champs-Elysées, for example, where the privileged classes would spend the vast majority of their time. These types of establishments were nearly off-limits to artists like Severini because of monetary issues and a prejudice against those not from the upper-classes.

\textsuperscript{38} In \textit{Comoedia}, n. 1189 (1 January 1911) there is an article entitled “La question des artistes français et étrangers” that discusses the influx of foreign artists into Paris in a particularly negative way. Thus, even
Despite, or possibly because of, the conflict inherent in the identity of the café, by the later years of the nineteenth century, variations on the earlier form were already appearing in the form of café chantants and café concerts. The official birth of these forms was around 1865, but it was only after 1870 and the end of the Commune of Paris that their popularity leapt to new dimensions.39 Both the café chantant and the café concert differed from the original café format in offering structured entertainment to its patrons, usually in the form of musical acts. They likewise differed from traditional theaters in that they allowed clients more freedom and mobility. Generally patrons would be seated around individual tables giving them the opportunity to move about during the performance, socializing and drinking.40 This allowed for a greater degree of mixing as groups danced near each other and enjoyed the same music and acts.

In the 1870s huge new café concerts were built with indoor stages and lush decoration. These varied from the earlier café concerts, in which the majority of the action had taken place either outdoors or on a small indoor stage.41 Some of the most well-known of these newly-built locales, such as the Folies-Bergere, the Moulin Rouge, and Le Divan Japonais, grew into what became known colloquially as Music-halls.42

though cafés provided an element of safety and acceptance, there was still an ongoing discussion about the freedom that they enjoyed there.

39 W. Scott Haine, The World of the Paris Café, 12 and 224.
40 Herbert, 79.

41 The increasing popularity of larger venues increasingly led to a phasing out of the first manifestations of the café concert and by 1912 they had almost entirely replaced the older locales of entertainment (Weiss, 5).

42 The English term ‘Music-hall’ was first used to distinguish these locales from the café-concert but soon became used interchangeably in publications with other terms such as ‘revue,’ ‘dance-hall,’ and ‘bal,’ (although these last two had more connotations of places where the public could dance). This insinuates that this type of entertainment evolved simultaneously in both France and England. However, the English
These were ever larger and more commercial in nature, offering an expanded range of entertainment, including circus acrobatics, juggling, sports, magic, animal acts, comic sketches, and cinema (beginning in the 1890s). They would also offer a generally non-linear performance of sketches on current events intermixed with other forms of entertainment.\footnote{43}

These performances were not without precedent; in the beginning they took the format of traditional vaudevillian street acts. While the lyrics and words recited on stage seemed harmless and generalized on paper—in order to bypass censorship laws—they were performed with the addition of well-placed gestures and emphases that made their satirical and often illicit nature undeniable. In this image by Henri-Gabriel Ibels taken from a special 1901 edition of the satirical journal \textit{L’Assiette au buerre} devoted entirely to different types of café concert acts we see the combination of a suggestive and ostensibly passable song with an image that makes the real meaning of the words clear (\textit{fig. 3-12}).\footnote{44} The strategically placed black cat head, a well-known symbol of sexuality, leaves little doubt as to the song’s significance or the character of the performers.\footnote{45} As

\footnote{43}{Herbert, 76. At the same time these venues began to charge more for the privilege of the provided entertainment either by charging more for drinks, or through the increasingly popular mode of an entry fee or seating charge.}

\footnote{44}{\textit{L’Assiette au buerre}, “Les Cafés-Concert par Ibels,” no. 36 (7 December 1901).}

\footnote{45}{The words to the song read:
\begin{verbatim}
Voulez-vous me donner un bout, bout, bout
Voulez-vous me donner un bout, bout, bout
Car j’ai un petit chat
Car j’ai un petit chat
Qui n’as pas mangé ça, ça, ça"
\end{verbatim}
mentioned in chapter 1 the symbol of the black cat had a particular meaning in Parisian popular and bohemian culture. Not only did it refer to the short story by Edgar Allan Poe and the infamous nightclub Le Chat Noir, but it had undeniable sexual references.

However, this observation holds much truth and upon further investigation Severini’s painting, Le Chat Noir, as we have seen, certainly alludes to the significance of the black cat for bohemian culture. A slightly later painting further reinforces this reading: the Danseuse obsédante, the first painting by the artist to specifically refer to the female dancer in title and subject. In this image, the faces of the two dancers are juxtaposed with that of a black cat, conflating the sexuality of the dancers with that of the symbol of the cat (fig. 3-13). The Danseuse obsédante is also particularly significant as it pulls together several themes that defined Gino Severini’s Futurist imagery. Most prominently these are the illicit nature of dancing and dance-halls, avant-garde culture and imagery, the style of the Neo-Impressionists, Symbolist identifiers, Bergsonian theories of simultaneity and memory and Futurist ideas of the interpenetration of forms. For the first time we can see Severini grappling with an attempt to combine Parisian tendencies with the relatively new ideas of the Futurists.

Thus the presence of the black cat in Ibel’s caricature is not surprising, even for all its suggestiveness. What is perhaps more perplexing is the categorization of these dancers as ‘English.’ In fact, every one of Ibel’s images in this issue is categorized according to genres of dance: a genre réaliste (accompanied by a song entitled “A Saint-Lazare” and a note stating specifically to any censor officer that the public never protested against this song, thus it was suitable for publication), a genre patriotique, militaire, exentrique, socialiste, etc. Each of these genres can be said to carry with it a
class or political orientation; the only ones to be classified by their nationality are the Spanish and the English. As already stated, Severini painted a number of images of Spanish dances, presumably because these (the flamenco, etc.) differed so greatly from other dances being performed in Paris. However, to segregate out a troupe of English dancers and to so completely sexualize their act is a bit more curious. Indeed nearly every journal devoted to the dance and the revue (*Comoedia, Music-Halls, L’Intransigeant*, etc.) from this time made sure to specify that the most sexual acts were performed by foreign dance troupes, specifically those from England and the United States. Marinetti, also, in his manifesto on the Variety Theater discusses specifically the animality and grotesqueness of American acts. He encourages the dynamism, crude gestures, and brutality that according to him only Americans could bring to the stage. And these acts by Americans and other non-nationals were for the most part more risqué. They were not subject to such strict censorship laws and they were the first to introduce the tango and the animal dances, discussed below.

As the acts grew in size and variety, so did their element of journalism. Jeffrey Weiss has suggested that this component of the Parisian review depended on topicality, allusion, and parody for its success. It jumbled together in rapid succession loosely linked scenes dealing with current events in a way that emulated both new art forms, such as collage, but also the syntax of the newspaper and satirical journals. By skipping from

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46 For example, an article in Music-Halls, n. 16 (15 August 1912) there is an article specifically on English dancers which both praises them for their precision and exactness (invoking the Tiller Girls) but also their sexuality and licentiousness (odd when there were French dancers imitating their steps and also taking their lewd acts to a higher level). There seems to be a desire to see the most immoral of the acts as coming from another culture in order to protect the ‘French’ from this criticism.

47 Marinetti, *Variety Theater*, 130.

48 Weiss, 30.
subject to subject these performances would not only keep their audiences informed and highly entertained, but confound the censors. Thus, through the music-hall act or revue, a certain strata of society was able to comment both on contemporary events and simultaneously to satirize them in a comic manner that was readily accessible to audiences from a variety of social classes.  

Jennifer Terni also argues that the revue or music-hall played two different but complementary roles in this newly shaped culture. First, the development of the revue was an integral part of the rise of modern spectacular culture that began to take shape by the 1840s and was renewed in the first years of the new century. It was the first performative genre to be linked closely to the commercial and media developments in Paris. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the revue provided a mirror of the social dynamics of consumption, social exchange, and identity creation taking place in Paris, all the while satirizing them on the public stage. Although Terni was specifically commenting on revues performed from 1830-1848, building on these points of view I believe the spectacle of the revue at the turn-of-the-century, with its puns, allusions and non-linear material, offered an accessible way for the general public to enter into the discussions and critques already taking place in the world of the avant-garde. It was modernist aesthetic made to appeal to the masses.

Although Weiss and Terni were some of the first major contemporary scholars to make this connection, it had already been made in 1913 in Marinetti’s *Variety Theater*...  

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49 For more information on the comic and disjointed nature of revues and their effect on artists such as Picasso see Weiss, chapter 1.

In this document Marinetti lauds the Variety Theater (by which he means a type of revue only seen in Paris) for going against traditional theater and turning contemporary events into a new and modern art form. He writes: “the Variety Theater, being a profitable show window for countless inventive forces, naturally generates what I call ‘the Futurist marvelous’, produced by modern mechanics.” He lists some of these forces including powerful caricatures, impalpable ironies, uncontrollable hilarity, analogies between humanity, the animal, vegetable, and mechanical worlds, cynicism, wit, along with stupidity, imbecility and absurdity pushing intelligence to the very border of madness, ending with a recognition that the revue gave precedence also to all new significations of light, sound, noise and language, a cumulus of events unfolded at great speed. However, despite his admiration for what the Parisians were doing with their revues he, as a Futurist and revolutionary, wanted to take this even further. Although both he and his fellow Futurists, including Severini, saw something in the Variety Theater that excited them, Marinetti stated also that it did not go far enough with its disjointed logic and suprising inventions and suggests methods by which this could be done, including the dancers dying all parts of their bodies in strange colors, selling the same ticket to ten different people, sprinkling the seats with dust to make the audience sneeze and itch, etc. Thus, although the Parisians have ‘discovered’ an art form with many possibilities, one that has the possibility of destroying “all our conceptions of perspective, proportion, time and space,” he sets the revue (as was conceived then) against his ideal form of the art form


52 Ibid, 126.

53 Ibid, 130.
Variety Theater. While he finds the revue tedious, a “parade of political personalities and events set off by wisecracks in a most irritating and logical sequence… nearly always a more or less amusing newspaper,” he admires the art form for what it could offer. Many of his suggestions were in fact carried out in the now infamous Futurist serate, in which the audience was provoked, teased, and manipulated to the point of frenzy. However, despite his best efforts, Marinetti’s form of theater never caught on in popular culture—it was too avant-garde. The general public went to see revues for entertainment and for information, not to be irritated. Severini recognized this and drew on the new and often ‘Futurist’ approved forms that the revue had to offer without attempting to interfere with the event itself. He was an insightful observer, not a revolutionary force unto himself.

Severini’s experience of Montmartre’s dance and music-halls was fundamentally modern in nature. Despite the importance of these locales of popular entertainment to the development of social identity in Paris, academic scholarship has only recently begun to explore their history and influence. One of the primary reasons that the revue is often not given true credibility as an art form is its association with French culture’s increasing commerciality. This connection between commercial and popular culture began to solidify in the first half of the nineteenth century and as the years wore on the bond between the two only strengthened. Thus, because of its veneer of the commercial, the revue, from its very beginning, was left out of contemporary discussions of an authentic peuple (which in France almost always referenced the traditional French customs of the

54 Ibid.. 129.
55 Ibid., 130.
rural working class, arguably lost by the turn of the century). These establishments, despite their increasing commercialization, were still known during the years before World War I as sites of transgressive and divergent activity and were likewise famous for fostering the artistic production of the avant-garde. Inside the walls of dance and music-halls there was a high level of artifice and disguise, manifested both in the performers and in the paying customers. They were not only sources of illicit entertainment but were bohemian locales in which all the participants could alter their personas, hiding their origins and creating a temporary mask for themselves. This possibility exerted a strong pull for a foreign artist attempting to negotiate a place for himself in a new social and artistic culture.

Popular entertainment was constantly evolving and the newest trends were crucial to the contemporary experience. Only in Paris, a city at the vanguard of vast changes in its urban fabric, would an unknown artist like Severini be able to combine the elements of a carefully crafted appearance, foreignness, and aloofness with a profound connection to popular culture and create from this a distinct and persuasive persona. It is thus only natural that Severini’s careful regimen of self-fashioning and self-transformation, and his

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56 As Sarah Mazza has shown, the category ‘bourgeois,’ despite its contemporary appeal (at least for some), has almost never been used as a positive self-identifier in France or elsewhere. Rather it is used to denote everything that true French culture stood against. As a result, vaudeville and its later spin-offs were always considered sites of tourism and popular culture that lay outside the boundaries of true Frenchness. Sarah Mazza, The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imagination 1750-1850 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).


58 The only other author to connect Severini with the bourgeois clientele of the dance-halls is Daniela Fonti. However, this reference is fleeting and confined to a single sentence. Fonti, Daniela, “Gino Severini. The Dance,” in Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916 (Milan: Skira editore, 2001), 11.
later artwork, would be indelibly linked to Paris’ newest and most modern sources of entertainment.

III. Severini: A Life in Painting and Dance

In terms of practicalities, it was not easy for poor artists to afford the entrance costs to these dance-halls. For example, it cost two francs to get into the Moulin Rouge on a normal night, three francs on Gala nights, and ten sous on Sunday afternoons (fig. 3-14). Even taking inflation into account this may not seem like an insurmountable sum for the age, but for an artist struggling to make ends meet at the turn of the century, it was significant. Severini had no family money and instead lived day to day, doing odd jobs, taking commissions when he could, and engaging in a constant warfare over payments from Marinetti (see chapter 4). Despite all this, however, he and other members of the avant-garde found dance and music-halls an irrefutable draw (especially when they were offered free entrance) and looked to them as entry points into Parisian life and as subject matter for their work.59

The atmosphere of these locales, in all of their many guises, was legendary. Piero Pacini describes it in terms that are very similar to the vocabulary one would use in describing a Futurist painting: “inside the dark red interior the frenetic rhythms of the orchestra, the movements of the dancers and the reddish haze of the intermittent light

59 In his memoirs Severini speculated that Modigliani did have family backing but was too proud to ever bring up the subject with his friend. We know, from other sources, however, that Modigliani was struggling with similar monetary issues but was trying to hide them by taking up the trappings of a bourgeois gentleman, similar to Severini’s project. See Mason Klein, ed., Modigliani: Beyond the Myth, The Jewish Museum, New York (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 6.
created the celebrated aspects of an ‘infernal swimming pool.’” It is no wonder then that Severini found attractions such as this irresistible and tried to recreate the atmosphere and energy of the dance-hall and music-hall in his paintings. Several guidebooks from the first years of the century echo these sentiments. Although there were guidebooks such as the Baedeker meant for casual tourists and foreigners, there were also a number published specifically for an audience seeking the ‘hidden pleasures’ of Paris (fig. 3-15). The majority of these are devoted to uncovering the dance-halls and after-hours clubs of Paris (and the illicit activities that took place within them), not just in Montmartre but throughout the city. However, in all cases, most locate the most famous and risqué locations within the confines or near the district of Montmartre.

Just as the majority of Severini’s paintings do not refer to a particular locale, he rarely makes reference to a specific dancer or performer. The exceptions to this include two paintings of Georgette of the Folies Bergère, one of Suzanne Merven of the Variétés, another of Gabrielle Alavoine of the Opéra Comique, and one of Miss Sahari-Djheli (spellings of her name vary) doing her danza proibita (fig. 3-16). This last painting is the

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60 Pacini, 7.

61 A typical performance at the Moulin Rouge during Severini’s time would begin at 8pm. Generally revues at the Moulin Rouge, as elsewhere, during the first years of the twentieth century would generally consist of a series of songs, sketches, and dances, some involving partners, and some performed by a single female (Larger productions with many performers became increasingly popular over time and by the beginning of World War I eventually won out over the smaller performances encouraging the involvement of patrons). Several times a week the evening would go later than officially planned as Zidler gave his dancers permission to enjoy themselves after the official show ended. This would often transform the hall into an open dance floor and the employed dancers would convince the regular patrons to join them in their fun. The orchestra would continue to play for a time and finally the general cacophony of the crowd would entirely take over, creating a chaotic atmosphere that would sometimes last until dawn. Seigel, 26.


63 Interestingly, these guidebooks do make a distinction between music-halls, where you could see entertainment on a stage, and bals, where the general public could mingle with professional dancers.
most interesting for our discussion because, as opposed to the other dancers who represent traditional forms of dance-hall entertainment, Miss Sahari-Djheli was a well-documented dancer from the Orient (not distinguished by a specific nationality) who made a significant splash in the journals and newspapers with her danza proibita or nautch dance (figs. 3-17, 3-18, and 3-19). For example, a review from the program of the Moulin Rouge stated that:

“starting this evening, La Revue du Moulin will have an extra number which will be without rival: the mysterious and alarming ‘Nautch dance’, performed for the first time by the beautiful Sahari-Djeli. It contains a series of poses which defy the imagination. The arms bend, writhe and describe curves of an astonishing ligheness. These are not simply movements of the hand and the forearm, but involve the complete arm. One has the impression of a wave motion, beginning at the shoulder, traveling down the arm and finally dying out at the fingertips. Then the movements gather speed, seem even to move against one another, and then dissolve in a disturbing harmony.”

The dynamic words that the reviewer chose to use in describing Miss Sahari-Djeli make it easy to imagine her effect on the viewer and also to understand why Severini was so taken by the visual impact of dance-hall performers.

Curiously, none of Severini’s paintings (at least in their titles) refer to the most famous players on the stage during his era, such as the dancers Mistinguett and Gaby Deslys (fig. 3-20). Nearly every journal from these years chronicling dance and theater in Paris were full of images and articles of these two superstars and they were treated as everyday celebrities, modeling new clothing styles and being featured in ads for all manner of products (figs. 3-21 and 3-22). It is thus unimaginable that Severini would not have seen these performers or heard mention of them—especially as Mistinguett and

64 Quoted in Jacques Pessis, The Moulin Rouge (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 25. I found other mentions of Miss Sahary-Djheli’s performances in Music-Halls, no. 4 (15 February 1912) and Comoedia Illustré, no. 24 (15 September 1912), an issue in which she also graced the front cover.
Deslys (newly returned from a tour in America) were allegedly responsible for introducing the tango and the Bear Dance, respectively, to Paris and these dances certainly caught the attention of the artist as we shall see. Likely Severini’s omission of specific names and dancers can be seen in the same light as his reluctance to name specific locales: he was more interested in the overall environment of the dance-hall as representing the ambiance of Parisian popular entertainment.

Severini also rarely discusses his contact with dance hall performers in his letters or autobiography (and only rarely in his exhibition catalogues). Although ‘dancers’ in general may be mentioned, the particulars of their origins and personalities are seldom referenced.\(^{65}\) This is curious because the turn of the century was a time when many Parisian stages saw acts by performers from all over the world, and of nearly all nationalities. Many of these performers, such as Miss Sahari-Djheli, drew upon their foreignness as a tool for entertainment.\(^{66}\) ‘Race’ itself became a spectacle. Perhaps Severini chose to avoid this topic because the artist himself was foreign and did not want to draw attention to the mockery that Parisians were making of foreign performers.

Regardless of Severini’s silence on the subject, the link between primitivism, foreignness, dance and even the machine were well known. For example, Lisa Tickner writes of how modern dance echoes the violent rhythm of modern life and stood in for the forces of technology, modernity, and discovery.\(^{67}\) Severini’s images, regardless of the lack of a written record, emphasized these ideas and we see in his dancers and their

\(^{65}\) In the letters that he wrote to Marinetti he does send greetings from various actresses and literary figures, but few to no dancers.

\(^{66}\) James Smalls, “‘Race’ As Spectacle in Late-Nineteenth-Century French Art and Popular Culture,” in *French Historical Studies,* vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 351-382.

\(^{67}\) Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects,* 81.
surroundings a sense of intuition of the new world.

As we have seen, Gino Severini was a frequent patron at many of Montmartre’s sites of popular entertainment, including cafés, cabarets, dance and music-halls and dance-halls. He writes in his autobiography that he would often meet Gino Baldo, an Italian illustrator also living in Paris, and Modigliani at the *Lapin Agile*, a popular café and cabaret, for drinks and artistic discussions.\footnote{Severini, *Life of a Painter*, 40} He must have been quite a regular since he talks intimately of Père Frédé, the owner. He also discusses the fact that this locale was the site of the formation of the “bande à Picasso” mentioned in chapter 1 and that it became a regular meeting place for artists in Montmartre just as the *Closerie de Lilas* was for those in Montparnasse.\footnote{The *Lapin Agile* also had a threatening and undeniably titillating side. Severini writes “this cabaret had a bad reputation with the bourgeoisie. They called it the ‘Cabaret des Assassins’ and told sinister stories about it. The fact was that Frédé’s son, a robust young man, had been murdered one night for mysterious reasons on the threshold of the cabaret by some ‘apaches,’ so the story went.” (Life of a Painter, 41) This almost offhand comment shows the extent to which Montmartre’s illicit nature was internalized by its residents, and also the fantastic illusions of violence that it conjured to the higher classes that were attracted by the promise of this danger.}

Severini’s preferred venues for showing off his own talents as a dancer, however, were those categorized as bals, places that allowed audience members (generally male) and paid dancers (usually female) to intermingle on an informal dance floor, as opposed to separating the dancers and the patrons with the use of a stage. The best-known of these were the *Moulin de la Galette*, the *Moulin Rouge* (at least in its early manifestations)\footnote{The *Moulin Rouge* was one of the rare clubs that, at least initially, offered a choice between its infamous music hall performances and a separate dance floor reserved for customers that was very like what is seen at the *Moulin de la Galette*. When it reopened after renovations in 1903 it completely did away with its dance-hall floor and focused all its energy on increasingly infamous and controversial revues.}, and the *Bal Tabarin*—the second two of which Severini himself says that he attended.
regularly (fig. 3-23).\textsuperscript{71} He writes in his autobiography that he

‘led a very, active interesting life. It was exhausting too. I would often
dine with my friend Costa-Torro, in the basement of his fashionable shop
on the rue Damrémont. From there, I would continue on to the Moulin de
la Galette, or more often, to the Tabarin, until after midnight. At that point
I would move to the Monico which was almost my exclusive battlefield,
for practical reasons.’\textsuperscript{72}

Although we can only guess at these ‘practical reasons’: free entrance, intimacy
with the owners, etc. it is safe to say that Severini felt a natural aptitude for these
dance-halls and was magnetically drawn to them as part of his quotidian life.

These nightly entertainments are not only engrained in the memory of
Severini himself, but also of his fellow Futurist colleagues. As Carlo Carrà
recollects “sometimes [Severini’s] eyes were puffy and his face appeared tired,
but an hour later, at the Tabarin (where he was admitted free) he would dance like
a idiot.”\textsuperscript{73} This comment hints that Severini’s noctural escapades were scandalous
even to other artists and that his notoriously ill-health, a constant topic in his

\textsuperscript{71} These three locales were perhaps the most notorious in Montmartre. The \textit{Moulin de la Galette}, high on
the butte, was the oldest and most respectable of the three, It opened in the 1870s and remained open until
1914, when most of its clientele was taken over by the Moulin Rouge and other establishments on the
boulevards. The \textit{Moulin de la Galette} has been immortalized in paintings such as those by Renoir,
Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Chéret, Gervex, Willette, Lamy, Roedel, Casas, Steinlen, Zandomeneghi,
Picasso, Van Dongen, and many others. The \textit{Moulin Rouge} opened in 1889 as a traditional bal, but closed
in 1902 to add a theater where revues could take place. It remained open until the 1930s when it became
known for its extravagant revues (and is still open today, but only as a tourist attraction). The \textit{Bal Tabarin},
although largely forgotten now, was incredibly popular from the time of its opening in 1904 through its
decline in 1921 (when the Moulin Rouge reopened after it finished repairs caused by a fire). However, its
memory remained in popular imagination even after WWII when in 1952 an English-language musical was
released called \textit{Bal Tabarin}, directed by Philip Ford.

\textsuperscript{72} Severini, \textit{Life of a Painter}, 54.

\textsuperscript{73} Carlo Carrà, \textit{Tutti i scritti}, 502. See also quote at beginning of chapter.
letters and autobiography, did not keep him from enjoying Montmartre’s popular locales.

Two early Futurist paintings, *Dance of the Pan-Pan at the Monico* from 1911 and the *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* from 1912 demonstrate Severini’s interpretation of the frenetic environment of the dance-hall.\(^{74}\) In the *Dance of the Pan-Pan at the Monico* from 1911, (fig. 3-24) two female dancers (named Nanette and Liette according to a letter written to Marinetti in 1911\(^{75}\)) dressed in red perform the pan-pan (an early imported dance from Argentina, discussed below) in the center of the room while male and female spectators are seated at café tables around them, and musicians play a lively tune in the background. The entire scene—dancers, customers, and musicians—is fragmented into a visual rendering of a multitude of colors, sounds, and movement. The energy that was manifest in the environment of the *Monico* is translated to the canvas via force lines, fragmented shapes, and vibrant colors. The painting is fractured along vague geometric axes originating from the top of the painting in much the same way that stage lighting cuts through the action it is meant to illuminate. The two primary dancers represent a continuous flow of collective energy that spreads throughout the space. The energy of the dancers is dissipated throughout the room until the dancers become almost indistinguishable from one another and from the other figures. All of this responds to the Futurist aim to represent the “universal dynamism” of objects in their

\(^{74}\) Unfortunately the original version of the Dance of the Pan-Pan at the Monico was destroyed and was later repainted by the artist in Rome in 1959-1960. While the second version gives us a sense of the structure and subject of the painting, it is clear upon examination of the actual work that the quality of energy and vibrance that must have characterized the original has been lost.

\(^{75}\) Letter from Severini to Marinetti (18 January 1911), preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson.
environment and their belief that “living art draws its life from the surrounding environment” and draws from the philosophy of Henri Bergson discussed in chapter 2.

The Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin, completed one year later in 1912, is similar in scope, but is undeniably one of Severini’s most curious and intricate paintings (fig. 3-25). It displays a significant change of style for Severini. In this painting, as in the previous, he definitively leaves behind the obvious force lines and the divisionist technique used by many of his fellow Futurists and adopts a style that is closer to that of the Cubists with whom he came into contact in Paris. Here he also includes real sequins on the surface of the canvas, likely responding to the new collage technique that Georges Braque and Picasso had developed earlier in the same year. However, despite its new stylistic innovations, Severini’s painting is true to Futurism in its bright colors, its simultaneous depiction of movement, objects, and sounds, and the group’s exaltation of the “frenetic life of our great cities and… the exciting new psychology of nightlife.”

The name of this painting, Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin, and its contents have always been a puzzle for art historians. However, building on Charlotte Kantz’ argument that the painting presents an assortment of pictoral symbols and emblematic figures whose meanings are dependent on association, it is possible to

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76 This is all the more curious as the Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin was painted while Severini was on holiday in Pienza, Italy. Thus, the majority of the painting was taken from his own memories of the dance-halls and the sketches that he brought to Italy with him.

77 Like other paintings that include sequins such as Dancer in Blue from 1912 (the first to use such a technique, the sequins have darkened with age. However, they originally would have caught the light and reflected it under display lights in much the same manner as the sequins on a dancer’s costume would reflect the stage lights.

speculate on potential sources for each element of Severini’s painting. The primary figures in the center of the painting are female figures dancing some variation of the cancan. Below this, in the lower third of the work, we come across images focusing on various elements of the nightclub: a man with his top hat, the scroll of a bass instrument, and dancing slippers that appear to have just been removed. There is also a possible portrait of Marinetti (complete with a monocle and moustache, his defining features) signaling Severini’s adherence to the Futurist movement. A self-portrait of Severini himself (although it is hard to identify) may also appear in the lower right corner, under a straw hat known as a boater, or paglietta. The words ‘Polka’, ‘Valse’, and ‘Micheton’ scattered around the painting are types of music typically played in dance-halls (however in both institutional French and argot a micheton is also a term for the client of a prostitute). These images are all easily connected to the general atmosphere of Montmartre’s dance-hall and Severini’s personal experiences in them.

Above the main dancers there is a set of more peculiar and hieroglyphic imagery. There are pennants of various nations (presumably referring to the international clientele of the club), an Arab riding a camel (perhaps a rare political reference in Severini’s work to the Turco-Italian War of 1911-12 in which Italy gained control of Libya), the face of a black cat (which can be connected both to the licentious nature of the nightclubs and to contemporary literature), and a highly suggestive image of a nude woman astride a pair of scissors (perhaps related to the dream and sexual imagery of Sigmund Freud, whose writings Severini had certainly read). Although the mystery of this painting will likely

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80 Marinetti was a press correspondent for this war and undoubtedly relayed information back to the other members of his group.
never be entirely explained it is perhaps Severini’s most complete treatise of Futurist ideas.

In the Dynamic Hieroglyphic, Severini experiments with fusing elements of the dance-hall with images and words from his memories and the events around him as he had done so vividly in only one previous painting: Travel Memories from 1911, discussed in chapter 2. Although Travel Memories was completed a year earlier and does not actively depict dance or the environs of the dance-hall, Travel Memories, like the Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin, responds directly to the Futurists’ fascination with the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Both Travel Memories and the Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin contain references to the underlying Bergonsian principle that one’s consciousness creates a reality from a constant flux of thoughts, memories, and sensations. For Severini, these paintings were an illustration of reality—his reality as experienced both inside and outside the dance-hall.

The Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin and the simpler Pan-Pan at the Monico can also be understood as visual manifestations of the Futurist desire to “put the spectator in the center of the picture,” a concept that particularly resonated with Severini’s experiences in the dance-hall. The formulation of this idea was also heavily influenced by Bergsonian concepts of memory and intuition (a kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is

81 Although this painting is more complicated due to its verbal and hieroglyphic plastic analogies, described by the artist in a 1913 Manifesto [Severini, “The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism,” September-October 1913, in Futurist Manifestos, ed. Umbro Apollonio (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001)], the overall composition and subject matter provide a parallel to Dance of the Pan-Pan at the Monico. For the quote see: Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacoo Balla and Gino Severini, “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910,” in Futurist Manifestos, ed. Umbro, Apollonio (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2001), 28. (Carlo Carrà, justly or not, took credit for that particular statement).
unique in it and consequently inexpressible). According to Bergson, the human mind functions as a receiver and organizer of the energies around it. However, it is only through memory and the process of intuition that the recipient of an image or gesture is able to enter into a thing, rather than perceiving it from the outside, and grasp the absolute, or the internal ‘total reality.’\textsuperscript{82}

The electric lighting of the dance floor (partially represented through gallery lighting reflecting off the real sequins in the painting), the pulsing music, the action of the dance moves, and the captivated audience all serve to break down the boundaries of form and space. Severini’s dancers are not confined to a single movement but reveal the memories and anticipation of past as well as future actions. The dancers are fragmented by the collective energy of the dance-hall and penetrate their surroundings, creating an increased sense of collectivity to complete the circular dynamic of the painting.

Severini’s compositions particularly responded to the Futurist idea of reaching out to draw the viewer into the canvas, inciting them to take part in the action being depicted (this is seen in a more explicit way as the frames of certain paintings were painted in Severini’s later and more abstract works).\textsuperscript{83} Although completely hypothetical, this idea echoed the way that the audience at Montmartre’s dance-halls would become active participants in the evening’s entertainment, either through the act of dancing or by responding to the performance taking place onstage, and thus they play a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of dynamism and excitement.


That Severini was uniquely aware of the intensely physical effect of the forces of sound, light, and rhythm found in the dance-hall is clear from a letter that he wrote Marinetti in February of 1913. Severini claimed that with The Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin he “wanted to express plastically and rhythmically the absolute feeling of the environment.”84 The energy and movement of these paintings are not solely the property of individual dancers, but are instead communal forces of energy that were felt by all in the nightclub. Severini not only attempts to situate the spectator within the canvas, but also to implicate himself, as the painter and as a participant in the dance-hall culture, in the center of the action. The artist echoes this central Futurist desire in an article written in 1913 for the Daily Express in London, saying: “we want to put ourselves intuitively in the midst of the objects, to form with them one single unity.”85 Severini is not separate from his paintings; his personality and experiences are instead inextricably combined with those of the dancers.

Two smaller paintings by Severini also depict this desire to combine dancer and environment. The Danseuse et Tzigane from 1913 incorporates the figure of a musician in the top left-hand corner (fig. 3-26). While this may simply imply that the orchestra (characterized as gypsy players) was situated in the balcony above the action, Severini’s inclusion of the musician demonstrates the physical embodiment of both the musician and music in Severini’s paintings. Several other paintings and sketches from the same time period also include figures other than dancers. Severini’s Danseuse Parmi les Tables

84 Letter from Severini to Marinetti (February 1913) preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprint in Anne Coffin Hanson, 72.

from 1912 is another successful example of his attempts to capture the entire environment of the dance-hall (fig. 3-27). This time the artist is also signaling the environment through the title, as ‘Parmi les tables’ refers to the fact that dancers would often dance among the tables at a nightclub to entertain the patrons as they drank and talked.

**IV. The Dances**

There is only one traditionally French dance that made a popular comeback on the dance and music-hall stage of Montmartre: the can-can (meaning “tittle-tattle” or “scandal”), alternatively called the *quadrille naturaliste* or *quadrille réaliste* depending on how it was performed. This was a holdover from peasant dances where lines of women would display themselves to potential mates (a type of folk dance originally sanctioned because of the lack of physical contact). By the late nineteenth century the cancan came to be immortalized by early performers such as La Goulue and La Grille d’Egout and continued to be a staple of Parisian entertainment throughout the twentieth century. The cancan went through a series of evolutions in the century before Montmartre’s dance explosion. By the time it hit the stage all previous sense of propriety had been lost and it had taken on overtly sexual connotations. The dance itself generally involved multiple dancers (or in some cases a single dancer of fame), wearing black stockings and a frilly skirt. Tradition (or popular desire) demanded that a few inches of flesh be allowed to appear below the mass of lace, turning the cancan into a highly eroticized performance for its time. The performers would kick their feet up as high as
possible and lift their skirts to give the spectators a glimpse of bare skin, teasing the audience (which was generally male) (fig. 3-28).  

The chahut (meaning “noise” or “uproar”), another variation on the cancan, was associated with more specialized sexual pleasures and was generally performed in the middle of a dance-hall (not on a stage) where spectators crowded around three female dancers and a male ‘director’. The women would grasp the edges of their skirt, tapping their feet and then begin to raise their legs in the fashion of the cancan. These high kicks were generally focused on one task—to kick off the hat of a chosen spectator. At the end of the spectacle, guided by the man, each woman would take turns dancing solo before landing on the floor in the splits (fig. 3-29).  

These dances have been immortalized in the works of a number of artists and writers. In fiction and in real life the cancan dancer became a high-kicking devil with the potential for revolution (even if only sexual revolution). Severini also recognized in the cancan both elements of sexual liberation and also those that fit into Futurist ideas and their interpretation of Bergsonian thought. He wrote in the catalogue for an exhibit at the Sackville Gallery in London in 1912 of his painting La Modiste (The Milliner) that “an arabesque of the movement produced by the twinkling colours and iridescence of the frills and furbelows on show; the electric light divides the scene into defined zones. A

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86 There also existed another form of entertainment at this time called the ‘undressing.’ This was more of striptease than a dance and while it was performed for the first time by Manon LaValle in 1893 it was considered incredibly risqué and did not gain full acceptance until after World War I. Rachel Shteir, Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22.

87 Georges Seurat’s famous painting The Chahut displays a much different and rigid performance of the chahut. The possible reasons for this will be discussed in the next chapter.

study of simultaneous penetration (fig. 3-30).”89 This comment refers specifically to the simultaneous energy of the dance, lighting, and costumes working together to penetrate the viewer in a sexualized manner (fig. 3-31). The viewer is subsumed by the work; it penetrates his or her space and draws the viewer into the morally dangerous world of the modern music-hall.90

Aside from his paintings of the general environment of Montmartre and the dance-clubs, Severini painted many smaller works depicting a single dancer. Some of these paintings, such as La Chahuteuse, refer to the historically derived French dance forms discussed above (fig. 3-32). Another example of this type of work is Danseuse à Pigalle from 1912 (see chapter 2). Severini writes specifically about this work in his 1913 catalogue (already cited in another context) for his solo show in London, explaining that:


90 There is one other dance with a verified Parisian pedigree, the Apache Dance, which never appeared specifically in Severini’s work. However, despite the lack of direct imagery it can be inferred that the violent energy and movements of his paintings may have been informed by the particulars of this dance. As mentioned in chapter 1, the apache stood for violence, amorality, flamboyance and erotic masculinity—all characteristics that went against the dignified manners of the bourgeoisie. According to contemporary criminologists, sociologists, and politicians, crimes of passion and the violence of the apaches was symptomatic of the fragmentation of society caused by modern city life and was a severe threat to social disorder (Eliza Earle Ferguson, “Domestic Violence by Another Name: Crimes of Passion in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” in Journal of Women’s History, vol. 19, no. 4 (2007): 13). This was a dance that reenacted the crimes of passion and sexuality explicitly and violently, the movements being extremely erotic and very tantalizing. The female character was thrown around by the man, threatened by him, pulled close, pushed away, etc. The dance generally ended violently, with the staged murder of the woman by the jealous male and the reassertions of masculine predominance. The dance was also characterized by the costumes of the performers, the dark and unshaven male with the cap of the lower classes, and the more delicate female with a flared skirt and a red necktie by which she was grabbed and thrown around. These characteristics came to be the defining elements of the apaches, not, as Lisa Tickner points out, as they really existed, but how they were packaged and presented for the entertainment of popular culture. Tickner, “Popular Culture of the Kermesse,” 73. However, while the bourgeoisie reacted with condescension and disgust toward these figures, there was also an undeniable attraction that many felt for the unfettered life and freedom from the strictures of society that the apaches were perceived to lead.
“the circular rhythmic movement of a dancer, the folds of whose dress are held out by means of a hoop. These folds preserve their exterior form, modified in a uniform manner through the rotary movement... Light and ambiance act simultaneously on the forms in movement.”

This statement implies that the costume and dress itself help to provide the painting’s circular movement. He is interested in the three-dimensional extention of the dancer through her costume. She moves out of the picture frame through her circular motion, pulling the viewer into her vortex.

One of the rare smaller works that contain multiple dancers is Danseuses Jaunes from 1911 about which Severini says, “forms are destroyed by electric light and movement (fig. 3-33).” This sense of violence is inherent to both Severini’s work and to the act of dancing itself. The lights and movements dematerialize the human body in a similar way to newly discovered x-rays. Electric lights had largely replaced the ambient glow of gas lighting in the 1890s and this made it possible to illuminate different parts of the stage in different ways and in different colors. This new technology had a large effect on dance and music-halls, enabling more dramatic and piercing spotlights that reflected off the costumes of the dancers and gave the environment of the hall a more modern and innovative appearance.

Rae Beth Gordon, in her book Why the French Love Jerry Lewis, has charted the reciprocal relationships between medical and philosophical discourses, revues, and public dancing between 1870 and 1910. She posits that the vogue for the frenzied style of

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91 Gino Severini, Marlborough Gallery catalogue (April 1913), 9.


93 Kern, 199.
performance often seen in the can-can and related dances created an analogy between hystéric, machines, and performers (particularly those from the lower classes such as La Goulue and Grille d’Egout). In a later article she develops these ideas further and outlines the rise of a genre of can-can dancers and singers known as epileptics.\textsuperscript{95} In this type of act singers and dancers imitated the jerky rhythms, tics, grimaces, convulsive movements and grotesque expressions of the epileptics and hystéric already made popular by Charcot’s pseudo-scientific studies on the subject.\textsuperscript{96} Gordon also points out that the popularity of these types of acts, which reached their peak between 1905 and 1907, was deeply connected to the theories of Charles Darwin (officially recognized in France in 1878) and the first imported displays of supposedly savage and primitive African dance at the \textit{Folies Bergère}, also in 1878. The dances of the ‘epileptics’, along with African American dances such as the Bear Dance and the Cake Walk, whose jerky movements were performed for the first time in Paris in 1902, made a deep impact on the spectacles and night-clubs of Paris.\textsuperscript{97} Paintings such as \textit{La Chaheuteuse} and \textit{Dancer in Blue} (fig. 3-34) convey the same sense of frenetic energy and jerky movements that characterized these epileptic dancers. While it is difficult to explicitly connect Severini’s paintings with

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\footnote{\textsuperscript{95} Rae Beth Gordon, “Natural Rhythm: La Parisienne Dances with Darwin: 1875–1910,” in \textit{Modernism/Modernity}, vol. 10, no. 4 (2003), 618.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{96} Jean-Martin Charcot was a French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology. He is best known for his work on hypnosis and hysteria.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{97} See chapter 1. The comments about bohemia being a mental illness that were made by Snyderman and Josephs bear a relationship to the epileptic dancer’s mimicry of psychogical disease. See also Jody Blake, \textit{Tumulte noir}.}
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the epileptic style, the artist would certainly have seen elements of the grotesque and the frenetic in performances particularly during his first years in Paris.98

Tracing the origins of French music-hall dances is not an easy task. Dance history itself has only begun to research the genesis and social meanings of many of these popular trends. In addition, dance from this period is notoriously difficult to study because it was not easily recorded until the widespread use of cinema during the first years of the new century and also because the steps themselves and their particular meanings were highly vulnerable to rapid change. At least initially, before dance manuals played a role in codifying individual steps, popular dance was at the mercy of collective memory and evolved from generation to generation and from locale to locale.99

The French have a long history of dance as a metaphor for social life. This historically took two forms: the more codified and formal dances of the aristocracy, and the communal and localized dances of the French peasants. The difference between these styles largely functioned to demonstrate the difference in classes, in both custom and

98 In a letter written to Marinetti 18 January 1911 he recalls seeing the Italian actor Zacconi in a production of “Ghosts” at the Théâtre de L’Oeuvre and although he says that it was an admirable performance he says that “Zacconi takes too much advantage of the effect an epileptic can have on the public; in all moments of passion or pain he is always epileptic…” Thus it is clear that Severini was aware of the word and its presumed style of performance. Letter translated by Anne Coffin Hanson.

99 Dance studios were opening throughout the city and there were dance lessons widely available to those willing to pay, regardless of background or class. Dance societies were formed to give the general populace a forum for learning and practicing new steps before taking them public. Additionally, the availability of dance manuals and sheet music made it increasingly possible for even the lower classes to access this spectacularly popular activity. The large variety of dances being performed and the expertise expected from participants meant that members of all social classes had to keep up with the latest trends and learn the steps to every new dance in order to remain in touch with modernity in its popular form. Jody Blake, Le Tumulte noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930 (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 44 and Lisa Tickner, “Popular Culture of the Kermesse,” 87. The plethora of dance manuals published during the years before WW1 was not confined to France but extended particularly to England and North America. See for example: Maurice Mouvet, Maurice’s Art of Dancing: An Autobiographical Sketch with Complete Descriptions of Modern Dances and Full Illustrations Showing the Various Steps and Positions (New York: G. Schirmer, 1915)—a book which combines the authors memories of his early days performing in dance halls and the subsequent spread of these dances throughout the west.
practice. With the advent of modernity and a more mobile society (both geographically and socially) these boundaries began to break down. Modern dance forms that resembled aristocratic dances (primarily by focusing on the couple and not the general community) supplanted traditional communal peasant dances, so necessary to the unity of the small agrarian community.\textsuperscript{100} By the end of the nineteenth century both types of dancing had lost their ability to denote cultural and class distinction.

Dances imported into France from other countries, such as South America, North America, and Spain began to take a prominent place in Parisian nightlife at the turn of the century. Severini’s Futurist oeuvre specifically reflects these new arrivals. For example, eight major images by the artist from the years between 1912 and 1915 are devoted to the Argentine tango, six to the African American Grizzly Bear Dance, and four more to assorted Spanish dances.\textsuperscript{101} The art historian Jody Blake has argued that the importation of social dances such as the Argentine tango and the Bear Dance combined elements of the ‘primitive’ with a desire to be modern. The exotic origins of these dances in conjunction with their fast tempos and forceful rhythms alluded to the very characteristics of modern urban life that appealed to the Parisian avant-garde.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, there was a conscious conflation of the primitive and the modern already deeply embedded within the dance world that was echoed by a similar sentiment within artistic bohemia.

\textsuperscript{100} Michael R. Marrus, “Modernization and Dancing in Rural France: From la Bourrée to le Fox-Trot,” in \textit{Dance Research Journal}, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1976); 4.

\textsuperscript{101} Severini also painted minor images of the Polka and the Valse, among other popular dances. Unfortunately the majority of these paintings have been lost.

Severini was thoroughly fascinated by the tango in particular, which ironically Marinetti first dismissed as retrograde and nothing but a “masturbated waltz” (he preferred the Cakewalk for its much more modern and jerky movements). Although images of the tango appear only during a relatively short period of time (1913 and into early 1914) in Severini’s work, the eight paintings and pastels devoted to the topic make it the largest number of paintings by Severini to represent a single dance.

The Argentine tango originally developed in the brothels of Buenos Aires and Montevideo and was introduced to Europe by Argentine tourists in the early twentieth century (figs. 3-35 and 3-36). Beginning with its commercial debut in 1911 at the new American-style dance-hall Magic-City in Paris, the tango spread throughout Europe with unprecedented speed as the wide distribution of dance manuals and programs show (figs. 3-37 and 3-38). One critic described the self-styled “primitive” and “unconscious” rhythm of the tango as something “that scandalizes us a little and pleases us a lot,” revealing the transgressive appeal that the dance held especially for the bourgeois male. The tango and its sexualized nature also highlighted the ambiguous social status (and potential illicit activities) of the professional female dancers in Montmartre’s dance halls. Severini’s obsession with the tango stems in part from it seedy origins and sexualized nature. While all of the artist’s images of the dance address gender issues, his

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103 Ibid., 49.
104 Ibid., 43.
105 Le Luxe de Paris, 1913, quoted in Blake, 43.
106 Other dances that were associated with the sexual and illicit nature of the Argentine tango were other imported Spanish-style dances, including the Brazilian maxixe, the Spanish flamenco and various gypsy dances (a few of which appear in Severini’s work).
sketches of the Argentine tango are among his most sexualized images. The intertwined limbs and fused pelvises of the dancers as depicted by the artist are quite capable of expressing the controversial and risqué nature of this dance and the magnetic pull that it had for Severini.

Severini was fully aware of the controversial but yet appealing nature of the tango. In this pastel of the dance from 1913 (fig. 3-39), for example, the respective bodies of the two dancers are easily recognizable, though they have been reduced to simplified geometric shapes constructed out of Divisionist markings. The forms of the two dancers have been welded together to create one unified mass. The dancers press their bodies together and move to the sensual rhythms of the music. The identities and the individuality of the couple seem not to matter, it is their intertwined limbs and fused pelvises that are capable of expressing the state of bliss associated with the dance. Compositions that depict this degree of sexual energy are rare in Severini’s Futurist oeuvre, but given the scandalous reputation of the Argentine tango, his interpretation is entirely fitting.

The Argentine tango was also seen as risqué because of the alteration in dress that it required. Because the dancer’s legs had to move more freely, large skirts with long trains were seen as cumbersome and awkward. A tighter skirt with a slit up the leg allowed more freedom of movement. Decorative fringes also began to adorn the edges of the skirt whose movements emphasized the swing of the hips and the quick rhythm of the music. As a result of this new style of dress the paradigm for female beauty (especially in performers) shifted from the curves and sensuous flesh of can-can dancers to a slender and linear silhouette that showed off a body with sinuous and long lines, changing
paradigms of female beauty. The female body was no longer concealed beneath cumbersome layers and was instead explicitly shown to the viewer.

Dances brought by Spanish dancers, including the flamenco, also fit perfectly within the frenetic atmosphere of the dance-hall. The rapidly stamping feet and use of castanets created a rhythm and energy that was extremely contagious. Severini writes in his memoirs about one of his rare images of such a dance, *Danseuses Espagnoles à Monico* remarking that with this painting he did not want to “describe reality, but to express a transcendental mode (fig. 3-40).”¹⁰⁷ He also wrote in his 1913 catalogue, “musical rhythm accompanies the arabesque of lines and planes, the harmony of tones and values. Lights, translated through abstract forms, now and then break into the rhythm.”¹⁰⁸

While Latin dances held a special place in popular imagination as well as in the mind of Gino Severini, imported dances from America were also taking Paris by storm during the early years of the century. The first dances to be imported into Paris were those associated with black honky-tonks and ragtime music in North America. Ragtime as a musical genre had only been introduced a few years earlier, at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*. As the British critic Augustus John wrote to John Quinn: “I haven't got the Tango-craze yet but I have a dance now and then; rag-time can't be resisted.”¹⁰⁹ Ragtime was the first truly American musical genre, predating jazz by several years. It began as dance music in the lower-class districts of cities such as St. Louis and New Orleans.


¹⁰⁸ Gino Severini, Marlborough Gallery catalogue (April 1913), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Tickner, “Popular Culture of the Kermesse,” 87.
before being published as popular sheet music for the piano.

One of the first American dances to be imported into Paris, however, was the honky-tonk cakewalk, which predated the later ragtime dances and was introduced at the *Nouveau cirque* in 1903. Although not explicitly associated with fully developed ragtime, the cakewalk also developed as a form of African American expression and originated as a dance-contest amongst slaves for which a cake was often given as a prize.\(^{110}\) Jody Blake has written about these imported dances and how they titillated European patrons with images of America as a savage land.\(^{111}\) This was only increased by the general awkwardness of the steps and the mimicry (of either primitive humanity or animal impulses) associated with the dances. As André de Fouguières of the journal *La Danse* wrote in 1920: “The fox trot, the one step, the tango are clearly of exotic origin; their cadence is jerky and essentially rhythmic. These dances that we call modern, because of their recent importation, derive from a prehistoric age, in as much as they are close relatives of negro dances.”\(^{112}\)

The so-called ‘animal dances’—the Bunny Hug, Turkey-trot and later the Grizzly Bear and Fox-trot—also originated in the African-American honky-tonks of the southern and western United States and were accompanied by increasingly popular ragtime music. The Turkey-trot (later replaced in popularity by the Fox-trot) was one of the first of these dances and its growing popularity in Montmartre was likely encouraged by the fact that it

\(^{110}\) Ironically, the steps to this dance were first developed to make fun of white slave owners and thus had an ironic sense of critique to them that was largely lost on its cosmopolitan American and then European audiences.

\(^{111}\) Blake, *Le Tumulte noir*.

\(^{112}\) Quoted in Blake, 55.
was denounced by the Vatican as an extremely suggestive and offensive dance form. This demoralization only served to increase the stylish nature of the dance. The Bunny hug was similar in form and concept, also causing an uproar in popular society.

The American dance that offered the most subject matter to Severini, the Grizzly Bear, was introduced to Paris early in 1912 by the Parisian music-hall star Gaby Deslys and her American partner Harry Pilcer. Severini began painting the Bear Dance (as it was commonly known) this same year and continued to produce paintings and sketches on the subject until 1914 (Fig. 3-13). This popular dance actually mimicked the movements of dancing bears seen at circuses with heavy steps that were decidedly ungraceful and undignified but extremely entertaining. Interestingly, Severini’s paintings of the dance largely focus on the circular movements of the dancers and overlook their awkwardness.

Severini’s images of the Bear Dance, like his images of the tango, are unique in that the artist often depicts a male and female couple, as opposed to the single female dancers that are featured in his other works. These pairs of dancers are almost always linked bodily and through force and energy lines popular in Futurist painting and theory. Severini himself writes of his image Bear Dance at the Moulin Rouge (fig. 3-41) as a “displacement of bodies in atmosphere. Two persons form but one plastic unity, rhythmically balanced.” This dance created a harmony of bodily movement, energy, and rhythm that clearly fascinated the artist and overpowered the lack of grace and

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113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., 43.

V. The Dance as a Metaphor

Dance historian Felicia McCarren argues that both avant-garde and popular dance forms at the turn-of-the-century were symptomatic of an epic shift in seeing performers as representations of the rising ‘culture of the machine.’ This can be condensed into two tendencies. The first is a response to the machine age in which performers in shows such as Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* look like machines and reference the surrounding world of the automobile, the airplane or the mechanized urban metropolis in their movements. The other reaction is a type of dancing that is more likely to be found in dance and music-halls in which synchronized chorus lines consciously work like machines, with efficient, mechanical gestures and an assembly line aesthetic of anonymous detachment and group synchronicity. This emulates the internal logic of the systems of time management developed by Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford around the same time.

McCarren even speaks of avant-garde as fitting (even if somewhat awkwardly) into this world. According to her, the works of Isadora Duncan (whom Severini saw perform several times at the *Théâtre de L’Oeuvre*) and other experimentalists such as Loïe Fuller lie somewhere in between the two extremes outlined above. Much of their

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117 Referenced in Gino Severini, Letter to F.T. Marinetti (18 January 1911), preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson. Isadora Duncan is also present in nearly every issue of the journal of the L’Oeuvre; there are at least two issues devoted entirely to her dancing and many articles.
work responds to avant-garde trends such as Etienne Jules Marey’s photographic explorations into the nature of movement and other cross-disciplinary collaborations such as that between Erik Satie and Francis Picabia for Rolf de Maré’s famous *Ballets suédoise* and between Picasso and Jean Cocteau for Diaghilev’s *Ballets russes* as well as the technical innovations and movement seen on the popular dance floor. I want to further argue that there was also a temporal and spatial quality to the choreography of these dancers that parallels theories of time and space being developed and experimented with among avant-garde artists and philosophers at the turn-of-the-century. To paraphrase Mallarmé again: the ballerina was not a woman dancing, because she was not a woman and did not dance. She was an otherworldly creature who wrote poems with her body and appeared as a totally impersonal vessel teeming with abstract, preliterate suggestions.\(^{118}\)

The idea of the dancer as a vessel to be filled by the imagination of the audience and the techniques of stagecraft alludes to this ultimately Futurist view of the dance as machinistic and fundamentally avant-garde.

In contrast to Loïe Fuller, typical readings of the dancer Isadora Duncan discuss her dance as emotional self-expression and unabashedly Victorian in its flowing forms and nymph-like costumes and movements—far removed from the technological innovations and forms of Loïe Fuller and other avant-garde tendencies and thus unlikely to have influenced Severini (fig. 3-42). However, this is not how historian Carrie Preston poems, and advertisements for her performances. There is also an article by Roger Marx comparing the dance performances and personas of both Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan in *Comoedia Illustré*, n.9 (1 February 1912). In the same issue a program for a dance recital is published that features both legendary dancers.

interprets Duncan’s dance. Preston instead sees in Isadora Duncan the beginnings of modern performance and relates her dances and their accompanying curtain-call speeches to other avant-garde groups and especially to Marinetti’s focus on bombastic manifestos and audience provocation. Duncan’s impromptu (and often polemic) speeches predate those given by Marinetti at music halls in London between 1910 and 1912 (and then again in 1914), but they seemed to have mutually influenced each other—with Marinetti taking Duncan’s form and practice and Duncan’s speeches getting more provocative in response to Marinetti’s controversial performances.

Duncan’s method of rehearsal and training are also exemplary on that count. She carefully choreographed all her pieces, rehearsing often in order to render the movements so familiar that they were ingrained in her muscle memory and no longer needed conscious thought to be performed. She also choreographed her dances so that each movement was a fraction of a second behind the music, thus giving the illusion that the movement is a response to the music itself and not the product of careful coordination. This illusion of spontaneity was integral to both her dances and the avant-garde desire to be in and of the moment. Duncan wrote in her 1927 autobiography, *My Life*: “Before I go out on the stage, I must place a motor in my soul. When that begins to work my legs and arms and my whole body will move independently of my will. But if I do not get time to put that motor in my soul, I cannot dance.” Duncan also famously declared “I never

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danced a solo” because of her feeling of “multiple oneness.” This is related to the Futurist admiration of the motor and the desire to create a ‘multiplied body’ connected both to the machine and to intuition. Although Severini depicted many single dancers they also give off this feeling of being one with the atmosphere and having multiple forces and visions.

We know that Duncan may have been at least a secondary influence on Severini because of Marinetti’s admiration for her, her constant presence at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, and also because she influenced the Futurist dancer Valentine de Saint-Point’s performances between 1913 and 1917. In 1909 (just when Severini moved into a study adjoining the offices of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre) Duncan had just returned to Paris after an international tour and moved into the same building as Matisse, Rilke and Cocteau. Although Severini did not remain in this studio for more than two years he surely kept up with the L’Oeuvre and his friend Lugné-Poë’s activities and writings. While several scholars, including Daniela Fonti, have refuted any cross-fertilization between Severini and Duncan, I hope the above argument has made a case for their common goals.

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122 Although the Parisian Valentine de Saint-Point wrote the “Manifesto of Futurist Women” in 1912, Severini seems to have had little or no contact with her and rarely references her in his own writing or images, the exception being a letter written to Marinetti on 10 June 1912. However, parallels similar to those with Fuller and Duncan could be made with her own avant-garde work. Likewise, Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and Vaslav Nijinsky’s “The Afternoon of a Faun”, performed first at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on May 29, 1912 and inspired by the poem L’après-midi d’un faune by Stéphane Mallarmé, can be seen as a possible referent for Futurism and Severini.

123 Fonti, The Dance, 14.
VI. Conclusion

The sense of modernity and chaos that was at the heart of the Futurist impulse was embodied in Parisian music-halls. As the popularity of these venues increased, however, Italy decided to open its own versions of café-concerts and variety theaters. Initially these were little more than copies of the French concept. The first dance-halls, opened in Naples, even used the French language on their menus and spoke to their patrons in French instead of Italian. Thus, Severini, in keeping with a Futurist theory that gloried in innovation and loathed mimicry, chose to focus on the birthplace of these venues of entertainment to stress their modernity and internationalism.

F.T. Marinetti’s own ode to the music-hall, his manifesto on The Variety Theater from 1913, emphasized the physicality of the music-hall stage, the athletics of “agility, speed, force, complication and elegance” as a performative counterpart to “new significations of light, sound, noise, and language.” Marinetti also writes that “the Variety Theater is naturally anti-academic, primitive and naïve.” Thus when Marinetti praised the Variety Theater for having “no tradition, no masters and no dogma,” he was drawing a profound connection between the artistic beliefs of the avant-garde and the entertainment culture of bohemia. The energy, excitement, newness, speed, and simultaneity of la vie moderne manifested itself in ideal form on the Montmartre dance floor.

Gino Severini likewise saw the dance and the music-hall as a metaphor for an altered state of mind, one that was inextricably linked to modernity. Through his

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125 F.T. Marinetti, *Variety Theater*, in Apollonio, 126.
experiences of the cafés of Paris, the revues, the dancers themselves, the styles of dance, and the mix of classes who were its audience the artist found a personal and highly recognizable format through which to convey his ideas. Using the dance-hall as a symbol of the complex and multivalent forces of la vie moderne Severini was able to create works that responded to larger themes such as class conflict and the onset of technology and mass consumer culture while remaining ostensibly outside the realm of overt political and social critique.

Severini’s experiences in the dance-halls and his subsequent depiction of them are instrumental in his production of his self-image and particular experience of modernity. Despite their increasingly commercial nature, these establishments were still known as sites of transgressive activity and were likewise famous for fostering the artistic production of the avant-garde. Inside the walls of a dance-hall, both performers and paying customers invested in artifice and disguise. Thus, these establishments were not only sources of illicit entertainment but were locales in which all the participants could alter their personae, hiding their origins and creating a temporary mask for themselves. For a foreign artist attempting to negotiate a place for himself in a new social and artistic culture, the dance-hall presented a situation of constant redefinition and redetermination. In Severini’s compositions the dancer metonymically stands in for a city eternally in motion, epitomizing the expression of dynamism and simultaneity that enthralled avant-garde artists.

In closing, two separate trends of dance are thus referenced (even if not expressly depicted) in the paintings of Severini’s Futurist era: avant-garde (or ‘modern’) dance and social dance. As a result, it is tempting to label them as manifestations of either high or
low culture, respectively. Although it is true that the dance-halls and night clubs catered
to a somewhat different clientele than performances taking place in a theater, the actual
situation is far more complex than this reductive reading suggests. Most economic and
social classes in turn-of-the-century Paris indulged in some form of dance as a form of
recreation and this did not always coincide with what was considered ‘appropriate’ for
their social class. Performers such as Fuller, Duncan, and most famously the Ballets
Russes, who considered themselves artists rather than performers and were often
associated with ‘high’ art, were able to blur the boundary between high and low,
appealing to both the highly educated cultural elites and also to the patrons of the dance-
halls, themselves a mixed group.126 The growing popularity for this type of entertainment
cut across class lines and echoed an increasing mania for the avant-garde in general.127
Artists like Severini, whose art combined the currents of the avant-garde with the
underground life of the dance halls, contributed to this continuous project to transcend the
boundaries of traditional society and to bring art into life. His images are, above all, a
celebration of modern life in all its contradictory and elusive states.

126 Although there is no evidence that Severini was influenced by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, Severini was
likely familiar with the company’s work.

127 Blake, 44.
CHAPTER 4

A Futurist Liaison

We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.\(^1\)

Futurism was a movement that began with words. When F.T. Marinetti’s “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” appeared in the French journal *Le Figaro* on the 20 of February 1909 the Italian poet had no movement per se, because he did not have any actual adherents to his ideas (fig. 4-1).\(^2\) In this sense, the Founding Manifesto was a call for action, protagonists, and, of course, a piece of personal advertising. Marinetti had acted alone, conceiving of and describing the new movement of Futurism in the hopes that his effort would appeal to like-minded cultural innovators. Although Marinetti himself was primarily a poet and a writer, having already published the journal *Poesia*, several books, including *Mafarka la Futurista*, and at least one play, *Le Roi Bombance*, before founding Futurism, his manifesto dealt with all types of art and first attracted the attention of five Italian visual artists, specifically painters: Umberto Boccioni, Luigi Russolo, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, and of course Gino Severini.\(^3\) This is not surprising as the manifesto includes a great number of references to visual art in the form of museums and masterpiece, proclaiming, for example, that visits to see these monuments


\(^2\) Research carried out for the 2009 exhibit “Futurismo 1909-2009: Velocità + Arte + Azione” in Milan has shown that the manifesto was in fact published in a small Italian newspaper several days before it appeared in Paris.

\(^3\) Both Balla and Severini joined from afar (Balla from Rome and Severini from Paris) as they were close friends of Boccioni and thus were encouraged to join the movement by him.
are “for artists, as damaging as the prolonged supervision by parents of certain young people drunk with their talent and their ambitious wills.” The new movement took a strong stance as to the artistic turmoil in which Italy found itself at the beginning of the twentieth century and Marinetti’s words gave form and vision to the rebellious ambitions of visual artists in particular.

Marinetti’s first manifesto brought forth a flurry of other manifestos on Futurist painting, sound, photodynamism, cinema, etc.; many written by the original five members, but also expanding to include musicians, photographers, dancers, and all manner of creative-minded people. However, all of these manifestos had to first meet with Marinetti’s approval before publication. The majority of these were written in a style similar to the Founding Manifesto—bombastic language and a contradictory rejection of the past. I say contradictory here because even as the manifestos railed against the stagnant past, the influence of this very same past was crystal clear in the writing and also the objects and performances produced by the new movement. Despite its stated desire to destroy all past styles and objects and to move forward to new types of expression, the initial prologue to Marinetti’s manifesto is written in a style very influenced by Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (with its notions of the ‘will-to-power’ and a rejection of the habits of the ‘herd’), the romantic language of the Italian writer Gabrielle D’Annunzio, and finally the Symbolist poets, with whom Marinetti had long-standing relations.

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5 The initial attraction of only visual artists to Futurism can also be partially explained by the fact that Marinetti’s own ego may have prevented other aspiring writers from taking up the Futurist cause in these first few years. He did not feel the same sense of competition with visual artists.
Five painters, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and finally Gino Severini were the first to place their faith in Marinetti’s ideas and shortly after the Founding Manifesto they began work on the Manifesto of Futurist Painters in early 1910. Although it is now agreed that the manifesto was largely the work of Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini approved “of it completely.” However, in this same letter Severini implied that the manifesto was the work of Marinetti himself. In a way it was. Not only did all manifestos have to be approved before publication by Marinetti but the manifestos were published under the auspices of his own publishing house and then were simultaneously distributed to various newspapers under Marinetti’s watchful eye.

Marinetti, however, never gave Gino Severini official sanction to publish his own independent manifesto. Several scholars, including Umbro Apollonio (perhaps the best-known translator and researcher of Futurist manifestos), consider Severini to be “the most intelligent theorist that Futurism produced.” The artist wrote many articles and letters that were indispensable to his Italian colleagues, but his masterpiece, “The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism—Futurism Manifesto 1913,” was never accepted by Marinetti and not published until 1957, when the Futurist movement was a thing of the past. This failure of Marinetti’s to publish Severini’s manifesto was only the beginning of the artist’s rocky relationship with the Futurist chief.

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6 Günter Berghaus has admirably examined Marinetti’s literary and artistic foundations as well as his own connections to France (which were considerable). Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), see primarily chapter 1.

7 Letter from Severini to Marinetti (Civray 17 March 1910). preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 135.

8 Apollonio, Introduction, 10.
I want to argue in this chapter that during his Futurist years (c. 1910-1915) Severini, despite his battles with Marinetti, was the primary link between members of the Parisian avant-garde and the Futurist innovators in Italy. The inherent tension between the movement’s often ultranationalist dogma and its international aspirations put Severini in a difficult position, I contextualize this by examining both Severini’s role as a cultural arbiter between France and Italy and the parallels between what Severini was striving for in Paris and what the Futurists were attempting in Italy. This chapter does not question Marinetti’s untiring devotion to marketing the Futurist cause throughout Europe, which I discuss below. What I am arguing, however, is that Severini’s internal knowledge of the French avant-garde during these same years had a larger impact on the formal and visually innovative aspects of the movement. While Marinetti was busy promoting the movement from a managerial perspective, Severini was changing the face of Futurist art and, it may be argued, Parisian art, by circulating information about both avant-garde movements. All this took place while Severini was trying to find his own voice, one that would stand out against the others associated with Futurism but also against those involved in Parisian trends.

I. Marinetti’s Own Transnationalism

Many, if not all, of Severini’s fellow Futurists had made their own trips to Paris to see the sights and to experience the art world there prior to joining Marinetti’s movement. Perhaps the most significant to do so was Marinetti himself, who had spent a substantial portion of his life in France and had traveled the world extensively before founding
Futurism. He knew the personalities and the leading ideas operative in the Parisian art scene before the turn of the century extremely well. In this way it is possible to say that Futurism originated with Marinetti’s knowledge of French experimentation. However, the majority of those avant-garde figures that Marinetti came into contact with in Paris were literary and theatrical figures associated with the Symbolist movement. So in many ways his information about what was going on in the French capital was outdated by the time he initiated Futurism. Thus Marinetti can be seen as a pivotal figure who worked tirelessly to circulate ideas between France and Italy during the time of the Symbolists in the hopes of bringing Italy up to speed with European avant-garde ideas. However, the circulation of cutting edge ideas was a project only completed by Severini in the early years of Futurism.

Marinetti had called Milan his home for many years by the time he published the “Founding and Futurist Manifesto” in Le Figaro. He did continue to make regular trips to the French capital to keep abreast of the literary and artistic situation there and to make his presence known with controversial articles and plays. For example, Marinetti visited the Abbaye de Créteil in 1907, a trip that had a profound impact on his founding of Futurism, and returned to Paris two years later to produce his play ‘Le Roi Bombance’ at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

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9 Marinetti was born in Egypt and then received a French education at a Jesuit lycée. He also attended classes at the Sorbonne around 1894 before finishing his studies in law at the University of Genova in 1899. For more information on Marinetti’s upbringing and how it may have affected his future actions see: Günter Berghaus, Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944 (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996).

10 This has not been adequately acknowledged before. Although in discussions of Marinetti himself it is clear that his education and upbringing were very international and that he made an effort to be a presence in the French scene, this same research has not carried over to the study of Futurism in general.
Perhaps more publicly apparent were Marinetti’s experiments with free verse poetry, a project that first began in 1898 when he published the poem “Les Vieux Marins” and was awarded a prize by the French vers libre poet and critic Gustave Kahn.  

This poem was subsequently recited by Sarah Bernhardt in 1899 at her theater in Paris, making Marinetti’s presence in Parisian avant-garde circles and his prowess with the French language undeniable. When he settled permanently in Milan later in 1898, Marinetti began to edit and publish the journal Poesia (1905-1909), a showcase for international Symbolist poetry and writing. It was under this publishing label, in fact, that Marinetti later published all of the Futurist manifestos and disseminated works of major international importance throughout Italy.

Even after the publication of the Founding Manifesto of Futurism and the formal cohesion of the Futurist movement in 1910 Marinetti continued to use his international renown to spread the word of his new movement throughout Europe. Some of the better known examples of this are his trips to St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1910 and 1913, respectively, and four trips to London starting in 1911, where he lectured on Futurism at the Lyceum Club and gave various other incendiary presentations. Between 1911 and 1912 he served as a war correspondent for the Italian journal L’Intransigeant first during the Italian campaign for Libya and then the Balkan Wars.  

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11 Marinetti also visited the Abbaye de Créteil in 1907, a trip that had a profound impact on his founding of Futurism two years later.

12 Berghaus, 18.

13 Richard Humphreys has suggested that Marinetti’s interest in Italy’s imperial adventures in North Africa was a belligerent attempt to carve out a bit of the action for the Futurists themselves. Richard Humphreys, “Futurism: May the Force Be With You” in Futurist Manifestoes, ed. Umbro Apollonio, 224.
organized Futurist group exhibitions in Paris, Berlin, Brussels and London, as well as throughout Italy.

II. Severini’s Introduction to Futurism

As Futurism was a movement started with words, it is appropriate that Severini’s first contributions were in the form of letters and other types of communication. After Severini agreed to have his name added to Marinetti’s Founding Manifesto in 1910 and signed the Manifesto of Futurist Painters in the same year there was a constant stream of correspondence between Severini and his Milanese colleagues. He wrote letters commenting on Futurist projects, asking for money to continue his own work, and most importantly to keep his Italian counterparts abreast of the developments taking place in Paris. Marinetti’s bombastic manifesto and love of all things modern and artificial seemed an antidote to Severini’s artistic dilemmas. And of course, the fact that Marinetti was independently wealthy and was prepared to back the entire movement did not hinder Severini’s choice. Shortly after his decision to formally join Futurism the subject of dance-hall interiors and the dancing figure itself began to appear in his work on a regular basis, and while different in subject and style from the production of the other Futurists these paintings can be seen as coming from the same Futurist impulse towards modernity, speed, newness, and technology.

Aside from several brief meetings in Paris and a formal introduction from Umberto Boccioni in 1910, Marinetti knew very little about Gino Severini before his acceptance of the Futurist manifesto. This leads one to suspect that Marinetti accepted the young artist as one of the first adherents to Futurism because of his rapport with Boccioni
and Balla, but also because it was convenient to have a promoter of the movement already situated within the Parisian avant-garde. At this point Marinetti’s influence in Paris was waning and Severini’s personal knowledge of new trends in the French capital would have been immensely appealing.

In 1910 Severini received an invitation from his friend from his Roman years, Umberto Boccioni, to join him in F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist movement. Although the Founding manifesto had been published in *Le Figaro* the year before, Severini appears not to have read the document at that point and not to even know of its existence. In the first letter that Severini wrote to Marinetti (ironically while he was staying with the Declide family in Civray) he thanks him for having received a copy of the manifesto and says that he approves of it completely, even citing a passage that particularly caught his eye.\(^\text{14}\) He then adds “could you send me a few copies of the manifesto? Has it been published in the Paris newspapers? Can one talk about it and discuss it freely?”\(^\text{15}\) Clearly Severini was unaware of the movement prior to this contact with Boccioni and Marinetti. He also expresses his delight at this time that the manifesto had also been signed by Giacomo Balla, with whom (as discussed in chapter 1) both he and Boccioni had worked closely in Rome and whom both considered to be a good friend and a mentor.

The following section of the letter is curious, however, in that Severini writes: “did you send the manifesto to our other friends in Paris?”\(^\text{16}\) This use of the word ‘friends’ insinuates that Severini and Marinetti had met before or at least knew of each

\(^{14}\) Letter from Severini to Marinetti, 17 May 1910, preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 135.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Here he is referring to the “Manifesto of Futurist Painters” as the “Founding Manifesto” had already had its showy debut in the Parisian journals.
other through mutual friends in Paris. Thus, somewhere between the twentieth of February 1909 (when the Founding Manifesto was published in *Le Figaro*) and May of 1910 either the two were introduced or had struck up enough of a correspondence to already be aware of their overlapping acquaintances.\(^\text{17}\) Indeed, the May 1910 letter is written in a very colloquial tone (addressed to “Carrissimo Marinetti”), refers to other examples of writings that Marinetti had sent him in the meantime (for example, Severini states: “thank you infinitely for the second package of *Poesia*…”), and ends with a request to “keep me informed about the outcome of your recent battles.”\(^\text{18}\) Therefore, it is safe to say that although this is the first preserved letter between Gino Severini and the Futurist chief, there is a lost body of correspondence or physical meetings that predates it.

In August of the same year Boccioni wrote to Severini asking for advice on who should be invited to sign the manifesto. Already Severini had written in the same May 1910 letter to Marinetti that “we must admit only the strong into the movement, those whose tendencies are solidly defined at least at their starting points, and whose sincerity in art is indisputable.” As a result of this letter we know that Severini was being groomed as a Futurist and that his opinion on which Parisian artists were doing work that was of interest to Futurism was being solicited and valued.

\(^\text{17}\) Aside from the Symbolists poets (above all, Gustave Kahn who acted as his mentor while Marinetti was in Paris) there are letters that exist proving the existence of cordial relations between Marinetti and Robert Delaunay (c. 20 February 1909—preserved at the Beinecke) and also Guillaume Apollinaire (letter c. 1909—also at the Beinecke) and letter 24 August 1910—republished in the book *Futurismo Avanguardia*, ed. Didier Ottinger (Paris: Éditions du Centre-Pompidou, 2009), 316 (depicted as an image but not transcribed)—all three transcribed in Mart catalogue, 39-40. Of course he was also in contact with Lugné-Poë (who produced his play *Le Roi Bombance*).

III. Severini’s Interpretation of the International Avant-Garde

Conserved in libraries and archives across the world are approximately 160 letters between Gino Severini and either other members of the Futurist group or those involved with its dealings (including critics, dealers and buyers). Although this most likely represents only a fraction of the letters that were written (Severini was not an avid archivist of his own career), they do give us a great amount of information about the artist’s Futurist activity. In the next few sections I will use information from these letters to piece together Severini’s interaction with and eventual defection from Futurism. This will not be an exhaustive analysis of the letters (better left for another project) but an investigation of Severini’s key contributions to the Futurist movement and also his fundamental disagreements with it.

In 1913 Severini was on vacation in Pienza, Italy, with his parents and new wife Jeanne Fort when he wrote a letter to an unidentified recipient describing the origins of Futurism as he saw them. The letter was written in French, and therefore likely directed towards Paris. However, it is also written in a very formal language signifying that whoever the recipient was he was not close enough to be on informal terms with Severini. Severini writes in the letter that the recipient had requested specifically for the artist to tell him about the origins of Futurism in his own words, which Severini vowed to do in the clearest and most simple way possible.

19 I have limited the scope of these letters by only including those written between 1910 and 1915, the actual years that Severini participated in Futurism. In this section I will also refrain from relying on information from Severini’s autobiography as it is an unreliable source due to its much later date.

20 The original document (and an Italian translation of it) is conserved in the MART archives: Sev.GSF II.1/2; a French translation can also be found in Écrits sur l’art, 28-31.
He begins his discussion of Futurism by saying that “as you know human genius does not invent anything but uses the elements surrounding it.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus Severini, as I have previously noted, is specifically stating that the Futurist movement did not come out of nowhere but was “the logical result of our epoch.”\textsuperscript{22} As I have discussed in previous chapters this is a point of contention between Severini and the other Futurists. While Marinetti and the other members of the Milanese group staunchly stuck to the original manifesto’s statement that the Futurist movement rejected the past, Severini was always more willing than his compatriots to admit that the past was still present in every new creation.\textsuperscript{23}

Severini then goes on to discuss how the work of the Futurist painters during the first years of the movement was incoherent and lacking direction. This is not necessarily meant as a negative statement as he takes pains to argue that his Italian compatriots did the best they could with what they had. He writes that they studied everything they could get their hands on in order to open their minds to new ideas. Not only did they study the great masters of Italy, but they also read the work of foreign philosophers including Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, as well as literary works by the French, Russians, English, Germans, and Norwegians.\textsuperscript{24} Severini writes that this sent them on a long and winding path through synthetic and plastic interpretation, impressionism, and disciplined analysis. However, even though the budding artists experimented with a great many styles and techniques Severini proclaims that they were fundamentally mired in Italian Divisionism.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} This is a claim upheld by Anne Coffin Hanson in \textit{Severini futurista}, 18.
\textsuperscript{24} Letter from Severini to an anonymous recipient, sent from Pienza in 1913 (MART archives).
and Symbolism. These are the very tendencies that Severini fled when he moved from Italy to Paris.

Severini writes that “the chain that held us to a vision of the real, notwithstanding our ardent need of freedom and our rebellious instincts, was hard to break in an atmosphere lacking useful alternatives.”  

He says that the Milanese Futurists knew only the names of Delacroix and Manet; they had not yet heard a word about Cézanne’s new techniques. Thus their version of Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism was purely instinctual (like all Italian Divisionism) rather than guided by the French masters. Severini says very explicitly that “you need to know that all of Italy, and Rome in particular, was a cemetery so cut off from the rest of the world that there never arrived there the smallest echo of the great artistic experiments that were developing in Paris.”

Here the artist is prone to exaggeration: while a certain amount of cultural exchange did take place over the barrier of the Alps, Severini’s statement does show how adamantly he believed that only by living in France could an artist make contact with new trends directly.

He also refers in this letter to his stays with the Declides in Civray writing that “unfortunately a terrible battle for my life obliged me to often ask for the hospitality of a friend from the provinces.” This is the only mention he makes in this letter of his own failing health and need to rely on the care and help of others. However, he also makes it plain that these sojourns in the country were productive and helpful. While they did take

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
him away from Paris and perhaps meant that he did not become truly integrated into the avant-garde community there until several years later it was in the country that he had the leisure to study color science. The pictures that resulted from this research, he writes later in his autobiography, often had something new in them that was independent of the reality of vision.

In this letter Severini also talks of meeting Marinetti. He writes that Marinetti had gotten to know Boccioni in Milan and that when Marinetti came to Paris to visit Lugné-Poë (Severini’s neighbor), Boccioni arranged an introduction between Marinetti and Severini. Severini writes here that he and Marinetti quickly became friends and that when the Founding Manifesto was launched in *Le Figaro* in 1909 it filled him with enthusiasm. This is curious since his letter to Marinetti from 1910 (discussed above) specifically alludes to the fact that he was only just then reading the Manifesto and had no knowledge of its prior publication in any French newspaper. Perhaps he did not want to seem ignorant of Futurism’s beginning to the recipient of this later letter, or perhaps at this point in time, three years later, he was so involved in Futurism that he failed to remember that he was a ‘late-comer’ to the movement.

Severini writes with great enthusiasm about the Futurist manifesto’s attack on the old and tired art of Italy and its exaltation of the violence of modern energies and says that these ideas corresponded exactly to the dual desires that he was already having to both create and destroy. However he writes that he will not try to explain the path that led him to embrace the philosophical outlook of the Futurist movement but says that “I

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28 Ibid.
propose to speak only of that which we called: plastic expression." 29 By this he means that he will confine his comments to the ‘plastic,’ which in Italian has the meaning ‘representative’ or ‘sculptural,’ rather than trying to explain the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. This gives us yet another clue as to the identity of the anonymous recipient in that it was likely not someone with inside knowledge of avant-garde movements, which had highly theoretical bases.

At the end of this rather cursory letter Severini mentions the other painters who joined the Futurist movement over the course of 1909-1910, saying that he had never met Carrà and Russolo before, but that his prior relations with Boccioni, Balla, and Marinetti led him to adhere completely to the manifesto. Together they launched the ‘Manifesto of Futurist Painters’ (11 February 1910). 30 Severini says that this manifesto hit Paris at exactly the right moment, one of transition, innovation, and reaction. Although it was not well received at first and angered many Parisians, Severini writes that one by one they began to see that the Futurists had a point.

This letter, although it only concentrates on the artists’ involvement in Futurism, does bring up several important points. The first is that while Severini had done much work in theorizing the movement (as we know from his early drafts of “The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism—Futurism Manifesto 1913”) he leaves this aside to focus on the historical development of Futurism (or rather, a specific version of this history). Second, Severini misrepresents some of the events of early Futurism in order to make the

29 Ibid.

30 Although Severini alludes to this as a group work and it was signed by all five painters, there is evidence that the majority of the manifesto was the work of Boccioni. It is doubtful that Severini had anything to do with its publication or that he even knew of the document until after it appeared in print. Apollonio, 5.
movement appear more cohesive and also avoids discussion of conflicts internal to the movement, including his disagreements with Marinetti. Finally, his comments about the ‘Manifesto of Futurist Painters’ are very telling. Severini writes that this text had a profound impact on the Parisian avant-garde—who were initially hostile to the Futurist movement, but then adopted many of its precepts. While he does not specify what the Parisians gleaned from the Futurist Painters, he does make it sound as if it was the artists who influenced the Parisian avant-garde not the other way around, as most scholars have argued. This is a common argument in the literature on Futurism, but what is new here is that Severini dates the impact to 1910, while scholars traditionally have argued that the Futurist impact on French modernism dates from the 1912 exhibition at Bernheim-Jeune.

A counterpoint to this letter is a rather long note that he wrote to Boccioni in 1911 describing the Parisian art scene.31 This letter was not transcribed in full until 1987 when it appeared with the label ‘unpublished’ in the Italian journal Critica d’arte and so has not been a critical part of Futurist scholarship. In this journal no attempt was made to analyze the contents of the letter, however I have found Severini’s comments to Boccioni to be one of the earliest and most comprehensive written sources containing information on the French avant-garde collected by Severini and send back to his compatriots in Italy. Specifically this letter contained Severini’s perception of the French avant-garde, which he divided into three groups: Cubists, Picassians, and Independents. This third group of Independents Severini admits to being a category of artists who work from their instinct and impulses, without any direction or cohesion to a specific group. It is also interesting

31 While the specific date of this letter is not known, Marinetti, in organizing the documents left behind by Boccioni, wrote on this particular letter ‘points sent from Paris by Gino Severini, 1911.’ Critica d’Arte n.12 (Jan-March 1987), 64-70.
to note here that Severini distinguishes between Cubists and those who followed Picasso. Although this distinction has earned credence today, it was certainly far more difficult to distinguish between the groups in 1911, when the Cubist movement was in full force.\(^{32}\)

Severini goes on to call the impulse of the Cubists (who he says do not truly know why they have been given that name) heroic, but infantile. He writes that they rely on reason to paint an object from multiple perspectives and views. Severini concludes that he considers them to be engineers more than artists and that he doubts their sincerity.\(^{33}\)

Severini then claims that the followers of Picasso, and Picasso himself, are of greater interest than those he designates as cubist. He states that Picasso’s good friend and collaborator, Georges Braque, lived alongside him in the same building so he had multiple occasions to discuss Picasso’s work with both Braque and Picasso himself. Severini writes that Braque had fallen under the influence of Picasso and believed himself to be a genius, but that he was unable to defend his own theories or those of Picasso in a manner that was convincing. He goes on to mention certain influences though, including Bergson’s ideas of intuition and a tendency to play with words and paradoxes that have been fashioned into preformed responses to any attack.\(^{34}\) With this statement it is clear that Severini, who undoubtedly admired Picasso and Braque, is also intent on finding their weaknesses and transmitting these back to the Milanese Futurists.

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\(^{33}\) Letter from Severini to Boccioni, 1911, *Critica d’Arte* n.12 (Jan-March 1987), 64-70.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
Severini writes that one of Picasso’s (or Braque’s) paintings has the potential to make its viewers heads spin before a satisfactory way to understand the image can be found (fig. 4-2). He goes on to say, however, that after the second or third time viewing the painting, one begins to grasp the key to comprehending the creator’s goal. Here he is clearly talking about an avant-garde viewer, like himself, as the majority of the uninitiated public would not know what to do with this work or would have taken the time to try and decode it. Severini then goes on to say, somewhat negatively, that while the paintings may be difficult to read initially, they become progressively easier due to Picasso and Braque’s propensity to paint the same motifs in the same manner repeatedly.\(^{35}\)

Addressing the issue of color, Severini notes that the Cubists restrict themselves almost exclusively to earthen colors, black and white. This is because, according to the artists, it is not necessary to use vivid and vibrating colors. Severini furthers the distinction between the movements by writing that a primitive being (meaning the Futurists) finds enthusiasm in the movement of a dancer or a boulevard full of people while an ‘evolved’ man such a Cubist is satisfied with the perceived movement of a chair. This ironic use of the designation of ‘evolved’ makes Severini’s own preferences for the dynamic subjects and the primitive trappings of Futurism very clear.

Severini does say that some of the Cubists’ theories approximate Futurist beliefs: for example, the ability to see a man not as a realistic object but as a ‘plastic’ form and the ability of movement to deform the shape of the object. However, he writes that the primary differences between the two movements have to do with the Cubists’ attachment

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
to the work of Corot, among other masters. He explains this in detail, equating the Cubists’ love for Corot to their being mired in the past. This echoes Severini’s premise stated later in his autobiography that he differed from Picasso by virtue of the fact that Picasso “looked to Corot as one of his masters at that historical moment. I [Severini], instead, looked to Seurat as my point of departure and my master.”36 Severini writes in his 1911 letter that the Cubist admiration for Corot had to do with the fact that all of his paintings were basically the same, using the same colors and interpreting nature in the same way.37 According to the Cubists, Corot was searching for the infinite in his art, a project that appealed to the Cubists’ own project (in the opinion of Severini).

Severini then discusses Braque’s comment to him that neither he nor Picasso wanted to include anything that could be considered traditionally beautiful in their paintings. They wanted to refute all beauty and all rich materials in a desire to move back to a painting of humility, with an intimate beauty that could only be seen by initiates into their way of thinking. Severini equates this with a Christian impulse and states categorically that his artistic spirit could not appreciate anything having to do with Christian religion. Instead Severini states that he wanted his colors to appear as diamonds and that his use of rich colors and light made his paintings rich in a way that the Cubists had rejected.

At this point, rather than completely disregard the paintings of his colleagues Braque and Picasso, Severini tries to find the value in them. As he says he does not want to ‘condemn any theory that has a great appearance of truth… It is only that their [the


37 Letter from Severini to Boccioni, 1911, *Critica d’Arte* n.12 (Jan-March 1987), 64-70.
Cubists] paintings were not in visual agreement with their views on art [as they described it in words].\textsuperscript{38} He writes that in a portrait, for example, the Cubists said that they were finding the physical harmony that existed between the eyes, nose and mouth (a connection that the Italian does not find convincing). Also, he writes that the Cubists had knowingly entered the realm of caricature in their deformation of a painting to fit a certain character. Severini takes issue with this statement, saying that it denigrated the project of Cubism and brought it into the realm of popular culture rather than high art.\textsuperscript{39} He then finishes his discussion of Picasso and his colleagues by saying that they more generally held the work of Matisse, Cross, Signac, Van Gogh, etc. in high regard, but Severini complicates this by stating that the Picassian Cubists were more interested in these figures for their revolutionary status as outsider painters than the rather mundane substance of their work.

Severini concludes his description of the Parisian art world with a discussion of what are now known as the Puteaux Cubists. He lists Léger, Le Fauconnier, and Metzinger particularly as the leaders of this band. Severini also discusses their debt to Corot (although he says that while basing their aesthetic on Corot they in fact followed the example of Cézanne). Despite his criticism of the work of Picasso and Braque he is even more disparaging about the rest of the Cubists, writing that their paintings approximate Impressionism but without the color and uniformity that made that

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. A note here: while Severini is very careful in the initial pages of his letter to draw a clear distinction between the work of Picasso and Braque and that of the other Cubists, this distinction begins to break down further in the letter until Severini ends up talking about the French avant-garde as an entire entity.

\textsuperscript{39} It is important to note here that while Severini’s own painting during this time had undeniable connections to popular culture (as I have argued previously) he clearly did not recognize this aspect of his own work.
movement valuable. Only Braque and Picasso, according to Severini, have anything in their art that is new and formidable.

The letter continues on ad nauseum to discuss the work of Rouault, Moreau, and Van Dongen, painters that Severini admits are interesting but minor. According to the Italian the only truly new and interesting art in Europe was being created by the Futurists and while he admits that the Italian group could learn certain things from the French painters, this letter is meant as a boost to the Futurist ego and an assurance that they were not being outdone by the French. In sum, Severini’s general attitude to Cubism and Picasso’s group was contradictory and variable—he was attracted by the experimental methods of the Cubists and the movement’s rejection of naturalism, but he also was unable to accept the repetitiveness of Cubist motifs, the abandonment of color, the renunciation of the role of light, and the absence of dynamism and modern subjects in their painting.

IV. The Futurists in Exhibition

The two letters discussed above are possibly the most important documents written by Severini during his Futurist years. These letters detail Severini’s evaluation of Futurism and Cubism respectively, and were meant to give their readers a more refined picture of the avant-garde movements taking place in Italy and France. They also served to position Severini as an artist and a theorist, at the center of both movements. Such correspondence, combined with Severini’s repeated pleas to Marinetti, played a crucial role in convincing his Italian colleagues of the need to travel to Paris to examine Cubist
painting first hand. Although several Futurists made individual trips to see Severini before 1912 it was only in February of 1912 that they came as a group to the French capital on the occasion of an exhibit at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery.

The exhibit opened on the fifth of February and included a total of thirty-five works: ten by Boccioni, eleven by Carrá, five by Russolo, possibly one by Balla, and eight works by Severini. It was immediately recognized that by putting themselves on display in Paris, the Futurists were setting themselves in direct competition with the Cubists. This only heightened Marinetti’s propagandistic spirit and he quickly arranged for the exhibit to move to the Sackville Gallery in London, to Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin, to a gallery in Brussels and as many as twelve to fifteen other venues. According to Anne Coffin Hanson in her discussion of the Futurist exhibitions, the majority of the catalogues from these shows have been lost and while contemporary news reports give some indication as to the trajectory of the show, we have very little knowledge of exactly where these Futurist works were shown.

Severini’s role in organizing the initial exposition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris was crucial, even if he was only a bystander for the rest of the tour. In the years leading up to his involvement in the Futurist movement, Severini had struck up a friendship with Félix Fénéon, (to whom he had been introduced by Lugné-Poë). Fénéon was a well-known anarchist and at that point the organizer of the Bernheim-Jeune’s contemporary division. Although no correspondence remains between Severini and

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40 See the letters from Severini to Marinetti translated and transcribed in the epilogue to Anne Coffin Hanson’s *Severini futurista*.

41 Anne Coffin Hanson, 19.

42 Ibid.
Fénéon about the exhibition, it is likely that Severini served as a connection between the Futurist group and the gallery. It is also known that Fénéon was old friends with Marinetti. According to Joan Halperin, Fénéon’s most recent biographer, between 1909 and 1912 Marinetti and Fénéon corresponded about Marinetti’s prison sentence for his controversial novel *Mafarka il futurista* (1909) and also about various details for the upcoming Futurist exhibition.43

Although I do not want to go into too much detail about the Futurist exhibitions that took place both in Italy and throughout Europe, a project that has been admirably taken on by Hanson and others, I do want to discuss in more depth a solo exhibition that Severini had at the Marlborough Gallery in April of 1913, particularly as this provided Severini with his first opportunity to use his own words to publicly describe the movement.44

It was at this point in time that Severini might have started to regard Marinetti’s status as the Futurist chief as a potential obstacle to his career development. The artist writes in his autobiography that Walter Pach, with whom he had become close friends, decided to organize a large modern exhibition in New York (which eventually resulted in the 1913 Armory Show in New York).45 He invited Severini to participate and the artist accepted on the condition that the other Futurists would also be invited. In a letter dated 12 November 1912 Severini wrote to Marinetti about this show, including a copy of the

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44 For more information and a list of all the Futurist exhibitions see Piero Pacini, *Esposizioni Futuriste 1911-1918: Cronologie e documenti* (Florence: Edizioni Scelte Firenze, 1985).

45 Severini, *Life of an Artist*, 111.
invitation. In this letter he also asked if he needed to make “arrangements” (meaning permission) to exhibit at the Indépendants that year. Clearly Severini was being offered opportunities in Paris and abroad but was still loyal to Futurism and to Marinetti’s creed that all exhibition requests be run by him before being accepted. At the end of this letter Severini writes “Please answer, don’t act the same as usual…” This is a very telling remark and speaks to the disintegrating relationship between Severini and Marinetti and Severini’s growing frustration with the constrictions of the Futurist movement (discussed in more detail below). Indeed epithets like this would become a common aspect of Severini’s communication with the Futurist chief from this date on.

Severini did not receive the response that he was hoping for from Marinetti, who forbid him both to include Futurist work in Pach’s landmark Armory Show or to show his work independently at the salons. In Severini’s autobiography he looks back on this moment and states that “so much that happened later was an outcome of that first show. Today it is clear how grave an error I made in not taking part in that magnificent international exhibition.” In 1912, however, Severini could not have known how crucial the Futurist’s absence from the show would be and he was soon distracted by yet another invitation for a show. Fortunately for Severini, and his future career, he found this invitation for a solo exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London to be something he could not resist, despite the edict from Marinetti not to show independently. Therefore, knowingly disobeying the Futurist chief’s orders, Severini prepared to show his work in

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46 Letter from Severini (in Paris) to Marinetti (in Milan) dated to 25 November 1912, preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 140.

47 Severini, Life of an Artist, 111.

48 It was at the Armory show that Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Nude Descending a Staircase’ became known as Futurism on the international stage, leaving the true Futurists nameless.
London. Although still very much a Futurist in name, this is the first time that Severini exerts his independence from the Futurist group.

The show in London would be Severini’s first solo show and as a result he was solely responsible for its content and the commentary that went along with the exhibition. Despite the fact that he had not taken part in composing theoretical writings on Futurism prior to this date and that his knowledge of English was poor (all of his writings were translated), he still made admirable use of this opportunity. The first place that his ideas found publication was in the “Introduction” to the catalogue of his show at the Marlborough Gallery. The “Introduction” has the dual aim of being an explanation of his working mode and his first attempt at writing a manifesto of his Futurist theories. In this document Severini states his aim to explore increasing abstraction with his painting, writing that “this need for abstraction and for symbols is a characteristic sign of that intensity and rapidity with which life is lived to-day”. This is particularly seen in paintings such as ‘A Dancer at Pigalle’s’ (fig. 4-3), which he describes as portraying:

The circular rhythmic movement of a dancer, the folds of whose dress are held out by means of a hoop. These folds preserve their exterior form, modified in a uniform matter through the rotary movement. In order the better to convey the notion of relief, I have attempted to model the essential portions in a manner which is almost sculptural. Light and ambience act simultaneously on the forms in movement.

49 A copy of this catalogue is conserved in the archives of MART.

50 Ibid., 3.

51 Ibid., 9.
This painting in no way approximates the nearly pure abstraction that he would reach in later works such as ‘Spherical Expansion of Light: Centripetal’ of 1913-14, but this and the other images in the 1913 exhibition do show an increased abstract impulse that takes its cues from the effects of light and motion on a female subject (discussed in chapter 3).

Like the passage above, the entire catalogue is full of references to the work of Henri Bergson. In some places he even quotes him directly as when he writes “to perceive, says Bergson, is, after all, nothing more than an opportunity to remember.”

While this is the only time he quotes Bergson directly, the rest of the ‘Introduction’ and the descriptions that Severini writes for each work in the exhibition are rife with Bergsonian language such as references to dynamism and spontaneity as well as memory and a lack of integral form or outlines.

However, despite the new philosophy rooted deeply in Severini’s language, he also spends a considerable part of the ‘Introduction’ defending his attachment to tradition (a topic which is extremely important to Severini, unlike the other Futurists, as we have seen). He writes that “we [the Futurists] are unfairly accused of severing all connection with tradition.” He then goes on to refute the Futurists’ so-called rejection of the past by making a case for an Italian (or Western) tradition. He does this by claiming that all the important French painters, including Cézanne and the Cubists, are working in a distinctly Italian fashion (with solidity in modeling, an aristocratic sobriety of tones, and a balance of values). As Severini writes: “Delacroix too, is Italian and, therefore, the Impressionists

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52 Of course we must remember that Severini’s quoting of Bergson is not cited and therefore represents a perception or memory of Bergson’s words that have been taken out of context or altered to fit Severini’s particular usage.

likewise.” Although it may seem that Severini is here defending a connection to the past, and to some degree he is, he is also setting the stage, as it were, for a critique of these very same traditions and with them the art movements that have made use of them. He does this by going on to say that only through the precepts of Futurism can an artist let go of the mass and form that serves to indicate an artist’s allegiance to past modes of painting. He writes that only “abstract forms will give the pictural [sic] rhythm of an ideal world.” This call for a language of pure abstraction was also at odds with the art of his fellow Futurists, who, unlike Severini, were unfamiliar with this latest tendency among artists residing in Paris (such as František Kupka).

It is in this ‘Introduction’ that Severini first tries to express what he means by ‘plastic perception,’ a concept that he had already discussed with his Futurist friends. He writes that this is what he understands by ‘plastic perception’: “the perception of an object in space is the result of the recollection which is retained by the object itself in its various aspects and in its various symbols. It must not be considered in its inmost nature, in its integral value, since we perceive it as a fleeting and complex continuity.” His use of the pronouns “I” as in “this is what I perceive” and “we” (“we remain thereby within the realm of the relative” on the second page of text) in the rest of the text show that Severini is playing a dangerous game with this ‘Introduction’—he is both trying to assert that his text is continuous with Futurist ideas (the “we”) and also trying out his own voice and his own opinions in a public manner for the first time.

54 Ibid, 5.

55 Ibid, 3.
When Severini sent the exhibition catalogue to Marinetti he met with a favorable response. Marinetti encouraged the young artist to develop some of his ideas, particularly those surrounding the plastic expression of sounds, noises, and smells, into a true manifesto that would be published under the official auspices of the movement (Marinetti’s personal publishing house), as were the other Futurist manifestos. Severini was understandably delighted and got to work immediately, seeing his opportunity to make an addition to the growing repertoire of manifestos to come out of Marinetti’s publishing house. However, on the first of September a manifesto entitled “The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells” was published by Carlo Carrà in an issue of the Florentine journal *Lacerba*. Although Anne Coffin Hanson argues that the manifesto in *Lacerba* was published without Marinetti’s apparent knowledge, this conjecture seems very doubtful given the iron fist in which Marinetti held the members of his movement. Whatever the circumstances surrounding the publication of Carrà’s document, Marinetti seemed pleased with the work and thus requested that Severini stay away from that particular subject matter in his own manifesto. It is from this point that we can truly date Severini’s problems with Marinetti, problems that culminated in Severini’s withdrawal from the movement during World War I.

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56 It was also at this point in time that Severini came into contact with several English painters, particularly Christopher Nevinson who became the first and only English adherent to Futurism.

57 Hanson, 39. When the exhibition opened on the 7th of April (Severini’s birthday) it stirred quite a reaction in the press and on 11 April an article by Severini appeared in the London *Daily Express*. This was entitled “Get Inside the Picture: Futurism as the Artist Sees It” and was a response to the puzzlement on the part of the English public over the show. I will not go into great detail as to the contents of this article since they were really a watered down version of the ‘Introduction’ meant to endear himself to the Gallery’s public and also to draw more publicity to the exhibition. I did however, go into such great depth about this ‘Introduction’ as it was both the first true exposé of his ideas and also would form the basis of Severini’s own (never published) manifesto.
V. Severini’s Rocky Relationship with Marinetti

Only one scholar has truly taken on the challenge of trying to unravel Severini’s complicated relationship with Marinetti. Marianne Martin, in a 1981 article, examines letters from Severini to the Futurist chief. Interestingly, she begins this article by quoting a letter that Severini wrote to Marinetti in 1930 stating the artist’s disappointment that the “old Futurists and certain historians of modern art do not wish to remember… how decisive and important my contribution to the first group of Futurist painters had been.”

She then goes on to claim that since that point Severini’s role in Futurism has received “much more adequate historical and critical justice.” While this is true to a certain extent, Severini’s role in the development of Futurism continues to be treated as a marginal subject. This is demonstrated by a continued lack of scholarship (particularly in the English language) on Severini, while the other founding Futurists have enjoyed much more press and prestige.

While Martin’s analysis of the Severini-Marinetti correspondence is by and large correct I would take issue with one aspect of her argument, namely that Severini’s address to Marinetti as “carissimo” in his letters of 1910 indicated that the two men were already of friendly terms. As I have already suggested, it is highly improbable that Severini met Marinetti on any of his trips to Paris (especially when he came to produce his play ‘Le Roi Bombance’ in 1909 at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, an institution with which Severini had close connections). It is more likely that Severini’s excessive address to the Futurist chief was a product of his high standing in the opinions of his friend Boccioni.

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and the tendency on the part of the Italians to be overly effusive in their formal addresses (at least from our standpoint as English speakers).

Despite Marinetti’s rejection of Severini’s original draft of this manifesto, Severini continued to work tirelessly on his declaration. As both Anne Coffin Hanson and Umbro Apollonio have shown, Severini’s manifesto developed over three distinct phases, his initial submission known as “Art du fantastique dans le sacré,” his submission of a revised text titled “Le analogie plastiche del dinamismo,” and a third period of intense editing and pleas for publication.\(^5^9\) While the first text dealt primarily with a description of how bodily sensations could be integrated into the painted field of a canvas, Carrà’s document in *Lacerba* made that draft obsolete. His second attempt instead took on the subject of plastic analogies that he was then exploring in paintings such as *Sea=Dancer* (fig. 5-15). For unknown reasons this manuscript was also deemed unacceptable by Marinetti, possibly because it contained ideas about analogies that the poet had begun to explore in his own writings. Whatever the reason, Severini continued to edit and repeatedly send drafts to Marinetti.\(^6^0\)

VI. Severini and Orphism

By 1913 and in the wake of his continued problems with Marinetti and other members of the Futurist movement, Severini was feeling, as he wrote in his autobiography, “pulled by opposite poles: Paris and Milan. Nevertheless I felt closer to

\(^5^9\) Hanson, 39 and Apollonio.

\(^6^0\) Hanson has done an admirable job of analyzing the manifesto in all its forms. Hanson, 39-44.
my Parisian friends beside whom my career had begun.”61 He was growing increasingly distant from the Futurist group and became far closer to key figures associated with the Parisian art world, in particular the critic Guillaume Apollinaire. The relationship between Apollinaire and Futurism was not altogether easy, as has been outlined in the little known volume called “La Fortuna del Futurismo in Francia.”62 For example, Apollinaire’s plans to collaborate in 1913 with Lacerba—which he had undertaken with Severini’s approval—were dashed by the appearance in the same journal of inflammatory articles attacking the French avant-garde by both Boccioni and Marinetti (their first collaborations with Lacerba as well).63 Also in 1913 Apollinaire began to laud the art of Robert Delaunay, coining the term Orphism to describe a tendency in French painting that had many similarities to Futurism. Apollinaire even went so far as to describe Futurism as “a variety of Orphism,” to the dismay of the Marinetti’s group.64

Apollinaire originally used the label to refer to several artists who did not quite fit into the Cubist mold but who combined the Cubist tendency towards the shattering of time and space with a new kind of colorful abstraction that was more akin to Futurism. The word orphique had previously been used by the Symbolists and was taken from the Greek myth of the singer Orpheus (an ideal artist for the Symbolists). They used the figure of Orpheus as a symbol of the poet and the artist in general; a figure who incorporated the study of mystical, occult, and astrological sources into their art. In 1907 Apollinaire wrote a collection of essays entitled Bestiaire ou cortège d’Orphée (Paris, 1907).
1911) in which he described the woodcuts of Raoul Dufy (significantly, a close friend of Severini) and his use of these elements. Orpheus’s ‘voice of light,’ which Dufy used in his poetry, was a metaphor, common to mystic texts, for ‘inner experiences.’ These ‘inner experiences’ could also be expressed through the means of a line drawing that would then take on its full meaning in a painting that combined color, line, rhythm, and metaphor. Thus, in the manner of Orpheus, the paintings that were described by Apollinaire could signify a direct sensuousness by means of color and light and thus lead to an innate knowledge of the artist’s innovative creative process.65

As a result, Orphism in popular language came to refer to the analogy between color and music. Apollinaire frequently spoke about correlations between the arts; for example in his 1913 text *Les Peintres cubistes: Méditations esthétiques* he stated: “In this way, we move towards a completely new form of art, which will be to painting, as known up to now, what music is to literature.” In this same text Apollinaire defined ‘Orphic Cubism’ as:

> the art of painting new totalities with elements that the artist does not take from visual reality, but creates entirely by himself; he gives them a powerful reality. An Orphic painter’s works should convey an untroubled aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time a meaningful structure and sublime significance. In other words, they must reflect the subject. This is pure art.66

Apollinaire worked hard to find painters that fit into the mold of Orphism and to promote their work. Ultimately this proved to be a difficult task as the painters considered to be ‘Orphic’ by Apollinaire—including Robert and Sonia Delaunay,

65 For a more recent published account of Apollinaire’s connections to Cubism, Orphism and Futurism see Adrian Hicken, *Apollinaire, Cubism and Orphism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

František Kupka, Francis Picabia, and Severini himself—had such different projects that they could hardly be considered a unified movement. In March 1913 a group of ‘Orphic’ paintings was displayed for the first time at the Salon des Indépendants. However, this was both the beginning and the end of the “movement”. Apollinaire shortly thereafter became involved in a heated discussion (moderated by Severini) between Robert Delaunay and Umberto Boccioni about the ambiguous term ‘simultaneity’ and thereafter his relationship with Delaunay cooled. As Delaunay’s work was the best and perhaps the only example of Apollinaire’s Orphic theories, the movement died soon after it was born. After 1913 Apollinaire did not use the term Orphism again in his art criticism, and became increasingly interested in the work of other artists, specifically the Futurists.

Aside from the Delaunays Severini was perhaps the painter that most fully represented Orphic ideals (although he never accepted the label despite his warm relationship with Apollinaire). His combination of color, light, rhythm, and the suggestion of sound in his paintings of dance halls had much to offer Apollinaire. In fact, from the earliest studies of Futurism a relationship between Robert Delaunay’s images, particularly his Fenêtres series of 1912, and Severini’s work has been recognized. Marianne Martin, in the first book to systematically explore Futurism, suggests that Delaunay was influenced by Severini’s formal and coloristic researches. However, later in the study she reverses this and says that Delaunay’s attempts to capture the movement of luminous reality helped Severini perfect his own style. Although this may seem

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67 Apollinaire also significantly lived with the Delaunays for several months during the winter of 1913.
68 Martin, 102.
69 Ibid., 144.
contradictory, I believe that Severini and Delaunay had a mutual influence on each other. Both drew from the same sources such as Unanimisme and Cubism. According to historian Sherry Buckberrough Delaunay’s project was significantly different both from Severini’s and the other Futurists, as well as the Cubists. While the Futurists made it their project to depict the modern city in relation to speed, aggression, and violence, Delaunay was concerned with the harmony between technology and nature.  

Delaunay’s *Fenêtres* series (fig. 4-4) and his many paintings of the Eiffel Tower (fig. 4-5) attempted to unify time and space through the action of light rays, a project similar to Severini’s dance-hall images (and also the few pastels and drawings that Severini did of the Eiffel Tower in 1912-13, fig. 4-6).

Although Severini had, as stated above, a good working relationship with Apollinaire, he was fully aware of what he considered to be the dangers involved with letting Apollinaire’s pet project go too far. In a letter written to Marinetti 31 March 1913, Severini says that he was fighting to have the word Orphism changed to Futurism in the parlance of the Parisian avant-garde. He says specifically that “Cubists and other avant-garde painters see danger in being understood as Futurists. They feel attracted toward research of Movement, complexity of subject. To escape the danger they invented Orphism.”

Later he writes from London that he had invited Apollinaire to lunch where they had discussed Orphism and Severini had attempted to win the critic over to his side.

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71 Letter from Severini to Marinetti, 31 March 1913, preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson.
He writes that he is hopeful about his success “since we have established a certain intimacy that I will use to our advantage.” Severini’s primary goal with this exchange was to get his fellow avant-garde members in Paris to acknowledge that Orphism was a subset of Futurist precepts and therefore that the ‘Orphic’ movements should be subsumed within Futurism.

VII. Severini and Cubism

Severini’s personal relationship with the Cubists is complex. On the one hand the French Cubist painters were his closest companions in the art world (both in terms of geography and also personal relationships); he was on friendly terms with nearly every member of the Puteaux Cubists as well as with Picasso and Braque. However, on the other hand Severini joined Futurism of his own volition. In many ways this put him directly at odds with the Cubist movement and its other French counterparts (including, as we have seen, Orphism). There is no doubt that Marinetti’s Futurists walked a thin line between accepting the impact of Cubism on their own work and rejecting its basic premises as completely contradicting their own more ‘modern’ ideas. There was no member of the Futurist movement who felt this push and pull more strongly than Severini. His physical proximity, the stylistic similarities between his work and his cubist friends, and open admiration for some aspects of Cubist explorations made the line he walked particularly precarious.

72 Letter from Severini to Marinetti, 7 April 1913 (from London), preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson.

73 Braque had a studio upstairs from Severini at 5 Impasse Guelma and brought Picasso to see Severini’s paintings on several occasions, where the image Travel Memories, in particular, had a strong influence on Picasso and initiated a kind of artistic exchange between the two artists. Severini, Life of a Painter, 57 and 96.
It was only when Severini officially joined Futurism in early 1910 that the artist began to see his own work as differing significantly from that of the other members of the French avant-garde. This is not to say that he had not previously developed a style of his own. As we have seen, although his primary influences following his arrival in Paris were French, the artist never saw himself as an integral part of any particular French tendency. He was influenced by French artists and worked to incorporate their discoveries into his own, but he continued to think of himself as coming from an Italian tradition and combined Divisionism with Neo-Impressionism, the ideas of Unanimisme and the resurgence of interest in Symbolism with the other experiments happening all around him. In fact, when Jean Metzinger demanded that Severini ally himself with the Puteaux Cubists in 1912 he refused without a second thought, seeing in Cubism only a stepping-stone to reach greater heights.74

By the time he joined Futurism Severini had reached a singular, if not entirely mature, method of working. Le Boulevard (1913) is characteristic of this; a painting that combined the Neo-Impressionist divided touch of color with the divided and simplified forms of Cubism. The artist’s relationship with Futurism gave him the theoretical apparatus to make this singularity even more concrete. It also gave him the impetus needed to embark on a series of works that were undeniably different from, but which still responded to, other avant-garde projects. As a result, Severini’s Futurist years, especially between 1910 and 1914, were some of his most productive and innovative.

When the term Cubism was first coined to designate a movement in 1910 Severini neither jumped on the bandwagon nor rejected the ‘new’ style. Instead he used the tropes

74 Letter to Marinetti (9 December 1912), preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 141.
of the Cubists, their geometrical faceting of objects, their multiple points of view, etc., and combined them with the precepts of Futurism, specifically the later movement’s theory of color and its relation to dynamism. He rejected only what he saw as Cubism’s affinity for earth tones, everyday objects, and still lifes. As time went on, however, Severini’s work began to have more in common with that of the Cubists and by 1915 the artist had broken most of his ties with Futurism and his work has much more in common with Cubism. In many ways, Severini’s ‘Cubist’ paintings bear close resemblance to the work of Juan Gris, who shared Severini’s penchant for crisp hard-edged forms and bright colors.

Severini discusses Cubism and its origins in his autobiography long before he even mentions Futurism. Severini specifically states that 1910 (the year that he formally joined Futurism) was “probably the most important year of that great historical epoch between 1900 and 1925” not so much for its political events but for artistic milestones such as the formation of artistic coteries, including the Cubist movement. He says that he recalls “an extraordinary feeling of dynamism that year. Even if it was not yet possible to draw clear conclusions since everything happened in such a chaotic manner (we were unconscious of the importance of our experiences), I still remember the situation very

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75 It should be mentioned that Severini later writes in his autobiography that “Picasso lived a rather conventional life with his ladyfriend, as if they were a married couple, and therefore all around him were still-life objects, home-like objects, which caught his eye a hundred times each day. Perhaps that was, if not the determining factor in his frequent choice of the still life, at least one of the explanations for it. In fact, after my marriage when I began to lead a more sedentary life, I, too, understood the beauty inherent in certain trivial objects... but at that time, I was full of immense ambition.” Severini, Life of a Painter, 95.

76 Severini, Life of a Painter, 57-58. Severini designates 1910 is a crucial year for the development of Parisian modernism rather than 1908 when Braque exhibited Houses at L’Estaque. 1910 instead correlates with the first use of the term ‘cubism’ in art criticism and the emergence of a Cubist circle at the public Salons. See A Cubist Reader, Documents 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12.
vividly…” With these statements, clearly written at a time when the importance of these events was more visible in hindsight, Severini places himself in the very center of the avant-garde transformations taking place in Paris. He speaks mostly of the influence of artists such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin and separates the various artistic experiments into those following Seurat and Van Gogh through the use of Charles Henry’s scientific theories, the work of the Fauves, and that of the Neo-Traditionals, whom he implied continued the work of Symbolism and renewed Impressionism through classicism and tradition. In the next section of his autobiography, he concentrates on what he describes as the most important of these tendencies, that which looked to Cézanne, and led to Cubism. He writes here that many have claimed that Cubism was born from the African statues being collected by his artist friends, but that this was not entirely true. They were indeed an influence and helped in the search for new models, but Severini insists that it was their ‘spirit’ and their unity of beauty and style that inspired the Cubists.78 While acknowledging this impact, Severini goes on to assert that, in his opinion, Cézanne was a much more important influence on the early work of Picasso, an assertion that allows him to ground Cubism firmly in the European tradition, and to downplay any conception that Picasso’s cubism signified a radical break from such artistic precedents.

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77 Ibid, 58.

78 Letter from Severini to Léonce Rosenberg (18 January 1919), MART Sev. III.3.3.
VIII. Severini’s Marriage

Despite Severini’s rocky relationship with the Cubists and their allies he solidified his position as an intimate within Parisian avant-garde circles with his 1913 marriage to the daughter of Paul Fort, the ‘prince of poets.’ For reasons never adequately discussed in any study of Severini or his artistic and poetic counterparts, the artist’s marriage to the young Jeanne Fort (she was only sixteen at the time of the nuptials) was not smiled upon by Severini’s compatriots in Italy. In several letters written to Severini by Boccioni and other members of the Futurist movement, including Marinetti, the Milanese artists and their chief attempted to dissuade Severini from his choice. They give no specific reasons for their disapproval but instead discuss it as if their opinion was the product of a consensus among the group based on conversations. However, it seems that by August 1913 everyone was resigned to the idea. Originally it appears that Severini wanted Boccioni to be his witness but because of the impossibility of Boccioni arriving in Paris in time for the ceremony he asked Apollinaire instead, who readily accepted. The wedding took place at the 14th arrondissement town hall. By all accounts it was quite an event. Marinetti was in attendance (as the other witness for Severini) and had brought his new white automobile to lend to the new couple. The bride’s witnesses were the American poet Stuart Merrill and Alfred Vallette, editor of Mercure de France. The rest of the attendees were no less important in the avant-garde world, including Max Jacob, André Salmon, Alexandre Mercereau, and many others.

79 See for example, letter written by Marinetti and Boccioni to Gino Severini (25 January 1913), in Birolli.

Perhaps more important than the impressive guest list, however, was a comment that Paul Fort made to the crowd once the mayor had finished the ceremony. He turned to the audience and announced: “This is the marriage of France with Italy.”81 The ceremony was even filmed for the news reel of the week (footage that still exists today), a testament to the importance of the occasion (fig. 4-7). Perhaps it was this coming together of nations that the other Futurists in Milan had found so distasteful initially. They were after all fiercely nationalist if one is to take their writing and political allegiances at face value. However, it was this same international blend of characters and Paul Fort’s resounding comment that made the wedding between Severini and Jeanne Fort such an important event for the avant-garde and for the spirit of unity between France and Italy. It is a testament to this unity that the marriage survived two world wars, Severini’s poor health, the loss of a child and constant financial problems, only ending with Severini’s death in 1966.

IX. Conclusion

I want to end this chapter with an anecdote to show how closely Severini had positioned himself within the French avant-garde even while nominally belonging to that of Italy. In his unpublished 1913 manifesto, *Plastic Analogies of Dynamism—Futurist Manifesto*, Severini states that “memory then will act in the work of art as an element of artistic intensification, as a true emotive source independent of any unity of time or place, and as sole raison d’être of an artistic creation.”82 Although this text was written two

years after *Travel Memories* was painted, Severini refers to the fact that with *Travel Memories* he had “realized the possibility of expanding ad infinitum the range of plastic expression, totally doing away with the unities of time and place with a painting of memory which brought together in a single plastic whole things perceived in Tuscany, in the Alps, in Paris, etc” (fig. 2-16). Thus Severini underscored the fact that his theories, in 1913, had their genesis in a work that dated back to 1910. *Travel Memories* was for Severini a vision of a condensed globe (ironically one of Marinetti’s favorite metaphors) in which the new modes of transportation and communication contracted time and space until distance had very little meaning. Clearly Severini’s breaking down of national borders in this work signified his own transcendence of a singular national identity and thus, the nationalist rhetoric of his fellow Futurists.

Thus, in a way, *Travel Memories* was Severini’s first manifesto on Futurism, albeit in painted form. This was not lost on the avant-garde. While Severini definitely recognized the importance of his painting in retrospect, Pablo Picasso seems to have recognized the new and exciting aspects of the work almost immediately. Sometime in 1911 Severini invited Picasso to his studio to see his latest work and to get to know the reclusive Spanish artist better. *Travel Memories* was still hanging in the studio at this time and caught the attention of Picasso. While the two artists went on to have a friendly (if not intimate) relationship Picasso gave the young Severini a significant ego boost.

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82 Severini, “The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism,” in Apollonio, 121. As we have seen this manifesto was ultimately rejected by Marinetti.

83 Ibid.

84 Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 165.
when he responded to Severini’s work by painting his *Souvenirs du Havre* in 1912.85 Picasso’s work was done very much in his signature Cubist manner, aiming to create a pictorial ‘memory’ of his time in Le Havre, on France’s northern coast. It had none of the swirling dynamism and luminous color of Severini’s piece. As Severini said: “Cubism: reaction to Impressionism objectivism, analysis, stasis. Futurism: continuation of Impressionism; simultaneity, plastic states of mind, synthesis, dynamism in the sense of duration and displacement.”86 Still, for all Severini’s criticism of Cubism he could not have helped but feel with this gesture that Picasso was accepting the young Italian as an integral part of the French avant-garde.


86 Letter from Severini to Marinetti (19 April 1913), preserved in the Beinecke Library, reprinted in Anne Coffin Hanson, 149.
CHAPTER 5

Abstraction, Dandyism, and Performance

It has been my aim while remaining within the domain of the plastic, to realise, in the paintings and drawings which I am exhibiting, forms which partake more and more of the nature of the abstract. This need for abstraction and for symbols is a characteristic sign of that intensity and rapidity with which life is lived to-day.¹

Severini’s first known self-portrait dates from 1904 (fig. 5-1). This is a rather severe pastel work that shows the young artist in a frontal position clothed in what appears to be a starched white shirt, a black coat and a beret-like hat. The painting is inscribed with the words “to my parents, this youthful drawing.” After consideration these words would seem to be an oxymoron since this self-portrait makes the artist seem much older than his 20 or 21 years and certainly older than he appears in a more well-known self-portrait completed the next year (discussed below).

At this point Severini was studying art in Rome and trying an entire gambit of styles in an attempt to find his own way. However, this pastel does not show the confusion about art that the young artist was definitely feeling or the indecision that he writes about in his autobiography.² The realistic portrait instead creates the illusion of Severini as an established and potentially prosperous artist. It is as if he did not want his parents to worry about him in Rome and this painting was meant to reassure them that their young son was making something of himself and not struggling for both money and meaning, as his autobiography and letters from the period prove.

² Severini, Life of a Painter, 16.
In this, my fifth and final chapter, I will look systematically at a series of self-portraits that Severini did throughout his time in Paris. Aside from his stated obsession with his self-fashioning in letters and his autobiography, the other method through which Gino Severini created a specific image of himself as a dandy and a dance-hall aficionado was through his self-portraits. The progression of Severini’s stylistic growth seen in the portraits mirrors that seen in the artist’s images of the dance. As a result, I will also discuss, when appropriate, crucial images that the artist made of the dance-hall from 1909 to 1916 and use the relationship between these works and the self-portraits to analyze in depth how Severini’s view of himself and his relationship to his work changed throughout time.

I. Severini’s Beginnings in Rome and Paris

Throughout the first four chapters my dissertation, I discussed many aspects of Severini’s work and life in detail, but I have not attempted to give an overview of his work and his stylistic evolution. My work begins in earnest when Severini moved from Italy to France in 1906; however, I do go back and discuss the artist’s early production and his frustrations with the art world in Rome. His production from this period is just what it appears to be, the work of a young artist struggling daily to make progress in his art. He and Boccioni, his earliest companion from this time period were very influenced by the work of Giacomo Balla, a future Futurist, and an artist of an older generation who took the two youngsters under his wing. He taught them all he knew about Italian Divisionism and relayed tips that he had gleaned from trips to Paris, but none of this was enough to result in a mature style for any artist involved. Severini read voraciously
during this period, including Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakunin, Friedrich Engels, Antonio Labriola, Arthur Shopenhauer, G. W. F. Hegel, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, various Russian novelists, and above all the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. He writes also of his interest in socialist and communist politics and so it should come as no surprise that many of the paintings completed during his early years in Rome were images of social unrest, class struggles, and strikes. Severini says that he and his friends were deeply concerned with ‘social justice’ and had a deep sentimental attachment to the oppressed. Although this element of Severini’s painting is largely disregarded when compared with his later Futurist imagery, I see his mature depiction of bohemians and dancers as an extension of this early “attachment to the oppressed.” Severini painted the downtrodden and working class of Rome and then Montmartre in the same way that Picasso painted asylum inmates and street performers.

Several works that Severini completed while still in Italy, such as several covers for Avanti della Domenica, discussed later, and oils displaying peasants going about their daily work, are particularly relevant here. Also, there is one location that he and Boccioni seemed to prefer for their youthful paintings en plein air: this was the area around Porta Pinciana (fig. 5-2), a largely working-class area of Rome that connects Severini’s early paintings to those that Boccioni did when he first moved to the outskirts of Milan and painted the workers at Porta Romana (fig. 5-3).

When Severini arrived in Paris his work tended toward darker compositions in pastel or charcoal (these were the only mediums he could afford). Along with landscapes

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3 Ibid, 11.
4 Ibid.
of Bois de Boulogne and places in Montmartre we also begin to see images of his friends, including fellow artists, poets, and other avant-garde figures. Among these works the one that stands out the most is a painting of the future Futurist adherent Leonardo Dudreville entitled “Acoltando la Musica.” This painting is a deftly executed pastel from 1907 of a fellow artist sitting in Severini’s spare studio (along with a partial image of the critic Mario Buggelli) listening to music with his hands mostly covered by his face (fig. 5-4). A study for this image shows a close-up of Dudreville and his hands and is inscribed to his friend Anselmo Bucci (who had gained, unlike Severini, a fair amount of success early in Paris) as a “remembrance of a wonderful winter (fig. 5-5).” Thus the painting recollects not only a difficult time in Severini’s life, when his finances were quite frankly a mess and his living conditions were not ideal, but a time when he was encouraged by a fellowship of young artists and critics with whom he fraternized. In fact, Daniela Fonti, in her catalogo ragionato of Severini claims that Severini’s studio was a place of solace for Italian artists and poets who otherwise were reduced to living in a residential hotel.5

Severini returned briefly to Pienza, Italy, where his parents had relocated, during the winter of 1907 in order to escape the winter cold and spare conditions of his studio in Paris. There he painted portraits of both his mother and father in pastel. Fonti states that Severini reverted to a provincial mode of painting for these portraits, which was more acceptable to the people with whom he associated in Italy, such as in this image of his father (fig. 5-6).6 However, in 1908, after his return to Paris, he painted a portrait of Madame Costo Torro, whom he had met through his French benefactor, which shows a

5 Fonti, Catalogo ragionato, 85.
6 Fonti, 86.
sense of movement and a looseness of style that came only with his move to Paris (fig. 5-7). Thus, we already see Severini attempting to change his style based on his surroundings and his potential clientele.

II. Constructing the Young Severini

Severini’s second and much better known self-portrait was a pastel completed in 1905, when he still made his home in Rome (fig. 5-8). This image is exceptional, however, in that it was chosen to be the cover of the journal *Avanti della Domenica* on the 24th of April 1906. This portrait largely sets the tone for other self-portraits that the artist would do throughout his early artistic period. Severini shows himself against a blank background, in a three quarter position with a black jacket, white collar and the same beret-style hat from his previous portrait. Although the type of headgear and clothing changes throughout the years it is more the expression on the artist’s face that connects it to future portraits. The look on his face is very severe, almost a frown, and his eyes look directly out at the viewer. However, this intense and penetrating stare can be flipped around when we consider that in all likelihood this portrait was done in front of a mirror. So it is not the audience that is the object of Severini’s gaze, it is himself. Everything about this piece screams criticism—the artist scrutinizes himself closely and seems to draw exactly what he sees: a young man in the guise of an artist depicted in a fairly naturalistic manner. But there is more to this image. Looking directly into the eyes of the young artist you can almost see the turmoil taking place in his psyche. This is the year that Severini later moved first to Florence and then on to Paris, making it the most

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7 Fonti, 80. Severini also published three other drawings on the cover of *Avanti della Domenica*: *Lavoro notturno* (n. 6, 11-2-1906), *Disoccupato* (n. 9, 18-2-1906), and *Tragedia* (n. 41, 30-10-1906).
eventful and trying year of his young life. He was without funding, frustrated with the artistic situation in Rome, and about to relocate to an unfamiliar place and culture. This is the self-portrait of a young man on the brink of making a crucial life decision. The indecision and self-criticism that went along with that decision is clearly evident in this work.

Severini’s 1905 self-portrait was completed in the same year as his first nod to bohemia and Paris, seen in *La Bohémienne* (1-14). This pastel of a young woman seen in full was very likely made after the artist’s first brief trip to the French capital that same year, but before he relocated to Paris permanently. This work is unique in that it is the first time Severini used a French title and also because it is the first real interest that he displays in the bohemian world. It is from this point in time that we can date the beginning of the artist’s nearly all-consuming immersion in bohemia and French popular culture. Although Daniela Fonti rightly points out that the model used for this work was likely the same as another pastel, *Lavoro notturno*, in *La Bohémienne* Severini has transformed his subject from a downtrodden worker into a self-possessed young woman wearing a black dress with a fancy white collar and hat.8 While the woman depicted is obviously not well off, she is depicted in such a way that her dress echoes that of the nightwalkers and artist’s models that Severini surely associated with French bohemia, such as the women seen in this image by Edgar Degas. (fig. 5-9) In reality there is very little in the actual image that would point to a specifically bohemian subject other than the given title. However, we cannot ignore this designation or the probability that in

8 Fonti, 82.
1905, on the brink of the artist’s move to Paris, he began to think of himself in terms of a bohemian as well.

**III. Dandyism and Bohemianism as an Artistic Stance**

From the moment Severini arrived in Paris, he began to position himself not only in the bohemian world of Montmartre, but also as another well known figure: the dandy. As mentioned in chapter 1 the bohemian lifestyle was one that needed to be dramatized and Severini did this completely, cultivating in himself a distinct and largely fictional persona. Severini’s adoption of the dual personas of a bohemian and a dandy enabled him to break down the barrier between art and life, which is a hallmark of modernism.9

Severini’s work as a whole during these years takes the Futurist desire to “place the spectator in the center of the painting” to a new level.10 For him the dance and music-halls were not only sources of illicit entertainment but also represented a liminal world in which he could recreate himself as spectator, participant, and artist, thereby intuitively merging his life and works into a single *gesamtkunstwerk*. Historian Susan Fillin-Yeh argues that the dandy is both artist and living art.11 Severini arguably fulfilled this precept by cultivating an image of himself as a work of art. He created a fictional identity for himself and then performed it in the streets and dance-halls of Paris. He performed the

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role of a foreigner, a dandified and elegant figure; an avant-garde artist; and, finally, he performed the role of a dancer and fixture in dance-hall society.

Severini’s self-portrait from 1907-08, probably completed in the summer of 1908 before Gino Baldo returned to Italy and before Severini went to Civray with his friend Pierre Declide, begins to show the young artist positioning himself in such a way that he fit into Paris’ bohemian culture (fig. 5-10). This portrait of the artist is very similar to the one that he had published on the cover of Avanti della Domenica except for two very important differences: first, a loosening of his pastel strokes to echo the Neo-Impressionist works that Severini came to Paris to study, and second, what looks like a cigarette hanging out the side of the artist’s mouth. As many scholars have noted, the cigarette is a sign of culture and male virility during the early part of the twentieth century. The fact that the cigarette shape is ghostly and ill-defined makes the viewer think that the artist was not yet committed to a particular self-image. Also, much of the self-criticism seems to have disappeared out of Severini’s eyes and is replaced by a look that attempts to show a devil-may-care attitude. At this point in his life the artist was not flourishing either financially or socially and so this attitude must have been primarily for show. As Gino Baldo, to whom the pastel is inscribed, was one of Severini’s last Italian friends to leave the French capital for the more familiar Italian landscape, perhaps Severini was trying to send a message of apparent well-being back to his friends in Rome.

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12 Fonti, 87.
Directly after completing the previous self-portrait it appears that Severini went to the French town of Civray to visit Pierre Declide, the dentist who became Severini’s first real Parisian friend. He stayed there from August 1908 until January 1909. While in Civray Severini painted a number of portraits, mostly of the Declide family, who were fairly well-to-do country folk. These portraits were primarily small paintings in oil or pastel done in a largely realistic manner. They show the family as Severini’s saviors, which in a way they were. The artist had just been through a difficult time in Paris, recently being evicted from his studio on rue Ballu and losing in the process the majority of his possessions and creative work. The Declide family took him in, nursing him back to health (which was a constant problem throughout Severini’s life), feeding, and clothing him. In his autobiography Severini mentions that Pierre’s father Camille, the most fashionable tailor in the region, made him a “summer suit of light-colored English material, an overcoat, and a tuxedo.” Severini, true to the image of the dandy that he was cultivating, was overjoyed at finally having decent clothing. Nothing made him happier than being accepted into society in Civray and having a respite from the financial and health issues that continued to plague him.

This transformation is distinctly shown in the single self-portrait that the artist completed in Civray (fig. 5-11). Inscribed to Pierre, it shows a well-dressed Severini wearing a Panama hat, suit and bow tie, and depicted with a pipe in the corner of his mouth. This is also the first self-portrait in which the artist depicts himself with glasses on. Presumably this was the first time Severini could afford to have his eyesight corrected, however, according to historian Olga Vainshtein the wearing of devices of

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visuality (glasses and later the artist’s distinctive monocle) might have had a very different connotation that connected it directly with Severini’s interest in dandyism.\textsuperscript{15} Vainshtein writes about the ability of a dandy not only to view others, but to be viewed himself as one of the defining examples of the type. This is not an uncommon argument in literature on dandies, but Vainshtein takes her article in a different direction by focusing on the accessories that dandies used in order to enhance their view. Monocles, lorngettes, and quizzing glasses were among the most popular accessories in the English dandy’s repertoire (which is Vainshtein’s focus). While it is obvious that Severini’s primary models for dandyism were French, such as Baudelaire and others that he met on the streets in Montmartre, he was not unaware of the dandy’s roots in England.

The self-portrait from Civray is also unique in that it shows an expressive liberty not seen in his attempts at oil painting from the period. Unlike the other self-portraits we have examined, the 1908 Civray portrait is done in light colors and depicts some type of vegetative or garden setting in the background. The background is depicted in very loose and expressive brushstrokes that serve to set off the actual figure of Severini, which is done in slightly tighter strokes and appears solid in the midst of the loose vegetation surrounding him. The entire effect is one of Severini in good health and peace of mind. He looks out at us from beneath the brim of a panama hat with a pipe (a habit he briefly took up in Civray) in his mouth, completely embracing the life in the country that was offered to him through the generosity of the Declise family.

Severini returned to Paris in January 1909, where he completed one more self-portrait before joining the Futurist movement in 1910 (fig. 5-12). This was a fairly

standard self-portrait, with Severini dressed again in his finery (presumably brought back from Civray) and with the telltale glasses and smoking apparatus (this time a cigarette). The workmanship is more realistic than his portrait from Civray, but unlike the previous pastels that Severini made of himself he is depicted in front of a wall on which hang at least two paintings. Although these paintings are not identifiable, we can imagine that this pastel might have been done in his new studio on rue Turgot.

The fact that this self-portrait was done in his new studio in Paris, which as mentioned before was directly across from the offices of the Théâtre de L’Œuvre, is particularly important given the fact that Severini inscribed this portrait “affectionately” to Lugné-Poë himself. Although I have written extensively about Severini’s relationship with Lugné-Poë and his theater, the existence of this self-portrait, which was one of the first paintings to be completed after his sojourn in Civray, makes it clear that Severini wasted no time in getting to know his neighbor and fitting himself into the theater’s inner circle. It also continues a trend that we have already seen in the Severini’s self-portraits: nearly every one is presented as a gift to someone whom the artist admires greatly. Severini rarely did more than one self-portrait in any given year (that we are aware of) but it is obvious from his inscriptions that he placed a high value on the depiction of himself and it’s potential as a souvenir or talisman for important people throughout his life.

IV. Dandyism and Self-Fashioning

The modern concept of dandyism appeared around 1800, at the moment when the traditional aristocracy was losing its influence on European society. As the aristocracy
struggled to maintain its superior nature in a world of increasingly permeable class boundaries, exterior signs and appearance became more important. As Jerrod Seigel argues, dandyism subverted the idea of the aristocracy and reconstructed it in a way that made it into a vehicle for a re-fashioning of the modern self.\(^\text{16}\) Although dandyism’s roots can be originally traced back to eighteenth-century England and the popularity of George ‘Beau’ Brummel, the concept spread quickly to France and became synonymous with the elusive qualities of appearance, bearing, pretension, and disdain.\(^\text{17}\)

Most definitions of the dandy rely on Charles Baudelaire’s description of the type. During his twenties Baudelaire lived the life of a dandy and famously defined those who fit that label as having “no profession other than elegance…no other status but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons.”\(^\text{18}\) He also writes that “the dandy must aspire to be sublime without interruption; he must live and sleep before a mirror” and thus that they polished their personalities into hard reflective surfaces.\(^\text{19}\)

This statement coincides very nicely with a group of three self-portraits that Severini completed in 1911. All three are entitled *Self-Portrait in a Deformed Mirror* and Jeanne Fort Severini remembers them as being studies for a painting (probably never completed or lost) for the *Salon des Humoristes*.\(^\text{20}\) Two of these sketches show an elongated Severini dressed in a bow tie, jacket, and glasses with a bowler-type hat on his

\(^\text{16}\) Seigel, 18.


\(^\text{18}\) Charles Baudelaire, *Painter of Modern Life*.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{20}\) Fonti, 122.
head. The first of these gives no clue as to the background, leaving the area behind Severini’s body entirely blank (fig. 5-16). The second shows what could be elongated columns in the background and depicts the artist carrying a cane (fig. 5-17). It is the third that gives us the best idea of the artist’s surroundings (fig. 5-18). At the bottom of this squashed and rather than elongated sketch Severini has written largely illegible scribblings along with the words ‘Monico’ and ‘Place Pigalle.’ There are buildings in the background and what looks like a cobblestone street. This portrait also differs from the other two in that, due to its squashed nature, it shows the entire body of the artist. He is dressed in a manner similar to the previous drawing but along with his cane he now carries a sketchbook. This portrait also shows the artist in three-quarter view, further enhancing the idea that Severini merely stopped in the street in front of a deformed mirror (possibly on the outside of the Monico) and drew himself in several different modes.

Although these sketches are humorous at first glance, and were supposedly meant to be so, they do give us the sense that Severini knew what it was like to live his life before a mirror. The word ‘mirror’ here is used in the literal sense of an actual reflective surface but also figuratively in reference to the people around Severini, who would be looking at the foreign artist through a lens of judgment and comparing him to what they saw in their own personal mirrors.

Severini’s adoption of the dandy persona is complex due to his poor financial situation and reliance on others, something Baudelaire’s dandy would never consider. This was further complicated by the artist’s physical appearance. Severini was a man of small stature and poor health, facts that he must have felt the need to compensate for in
his new Parisian life. Therefore, by playing up other attributes, such as his intense focus on both clothing and the dance-hall, he was deflecting attention from his very physicality. As I have argued before Severini was at a disadvantage in Paris due to his foreignness and poverty but also because of his continuing bad health (which manifested itself as lung disease and tuberculosis). Thus, it is curious that nearly all of his self-portraits, pre-Futurist and Futurist, depict just the artist’s face, taking attention away from his smaller stature. The materials of his frailty, primarily glasses (and later the monocle) and a cane, could be hidden behind the tropes of dandyism and became elements of fashion rather than frailty. Above all else a Futurist artist could not be seen to be frail. By its very nature Futurism was all about virility and dynamism, something the sickly Severini needed to project through his dandy persona.

V. The First Futurist Portrait

Severini’s first portrait from his Futurist era, aside from the three sketches in the deformed mirror discussed above, was painted in 1912 and was titled Self-Portrait (My Rhythm) 21 (fig. 5-19). Significantly this was the first self-portrait that he did in oil and also the first for which there exists a prior sketch, Self-Portrait with ‘Canotier’ completed in pencil earlier in the year (fig. 5-20). Although Severini had painted several other Futurist scenes during his short time with the group, starting with Travel Memories from c. 1911, this is the first time that he tackled a sedentary subject—himself—in a large

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21 This painting was considered stolen and so Severini made a nearly perfect replica in 1960. The replica is housed at the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris while the original, recently found, is in a private collection in Rome.
format. This seemed to be a difficult subject for Severini judging by the sketch that he did in preparation for the oil painting.

The study for Self-Portrait (My Rhythm) is of the same dimensions as the final project, however, the amount of space that the composition takes up on the page is significantly smaller. It is as if Severini was having a difficult time getting away from the realistic portraits that he had done in the past. Although the artist added force lines and other fracturing elements to the study it seems as though he was unable to really move outside the actual shape and size of the depicted head. The face displays the most fracturing and is rendered nearly unreadable by the lines and shapes that distort the head. However, after examining the picture for a while, the same elements of Severini’s previous self-portraits become apparent. Here we see again a well-dressed man with a fashionable hat on his head, monocle on his right eye, and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

It is clear that when Severini began to do the final oil drawing for his self-portrait he looked at this sketch rather than into a mirror. The lines that fractured the pencil drawing become sharper and extend out to the edges of the canvas. The face is still barely legible but one can see that now the features are distorted by the more regular lines of an outwardly radiating mass of lines. Features such as the artist’s eye, tie, and monocle are fractured and then repeated, reaching beyond the confines of the physical body.

Severini makes some interesting comments about this painting and others done around the same time. In September 1913 he wrote to Ardegno Soffici from Pienza, where he was vacationing with his new bride at his parent’s residence, that:
“at the moment of our exhibit at the Bernheim, the cubists, Picasso and my Futurist friends accused me more or less openly of an objective impressionism and of neo-impressionism…. Thus I made a series of paintings that you know and that were exhibited in Rome; in these I wanted to reconcile the external and internal aspects of things, the formed conceived as the same as the emotional form; luckily my intuition saved me from static painting and also from a cubist analysis almost despite myself… 22

It is amusing then that this self-portrait and several other images he painted for display in the 1913 Futurist exhibition at the Galleria Sprovieri in Rome are much closer relatives to various cubist paintings such as Jean Metzinger’s *Le Goûter* and Juan Gris’ *Portrait de Germaine Raynal*. 23 There was a palpable struggle within the artist as to whether his primary influences were his Italian compatriots or members of the French avant-garde. The only contemporary critic that seemed to understand his struggle was the Italian critic Roberto Longhi. Longhi writes that “he, in his Self-Portrait attempts to resolve—and this is no small feat—the problem of cubist painting, but conceived in movement. This is no longer an artist that paints coolly by smoothing all of the superficial elements of a body, but it is the body itself that turns around presenting many diverse forms…” 24 The same problems and Severini’s solutions for them can be seen in comparable work from this time such as the *Abstract Rhythm of Madame M.S.* (fig. 5-21).

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22 Letter from Severini to Ardegno Soffici (September 1913), reprinted in Drudi Gambillo, volume 1, 1958, 291.

23 Fonti, 123

24 Robert Longhi, 1913; quoted in Fonti, 123.
VI. Severini’s Mature Futurist Work

The majority of Severini’s Futurist years in Paris (1910-1915) can be broken down into three broad categories for the purposes of discussion: images devoted to the general environment and inhabitants of Montmartre, images of types of dance or of individual dancers, and an increasing tendency towards abstraction. Each of these categories will be broken down and analyzed in an attempt to reconstruct the totality of Severini’s experiences in Montmartre and its sites of popular culture.

Many of Severini’s early paintings of Montmartre’s dance-clubs are not only concerned with a central event, generally one or more dancing figures, but also the world surrounding and supporting the performance. Patrons, employees, and musicians are depicted alongside the performers, creating a sense of the complete environment of the dance-hall. These images were heavily influenced by the metaphysical theory of Bergson, as we have seen. According to Bergson, it is only through memory and the process of intuition that the recipient of an image or gesture is able to enter into a thing, rather than perceiving it from the outside, and grasp the absolute, or in Severini’s words, ‘total reality.’

Around 1912 Severini’s paintings and sketches increasingly begin to reference a specific dance, a particular locale, or a favorite dancer. For example, eight major images from the years between 1912 and 1915, the years that will make up the primary focus of this study, are devoted to the Argentine tango, six to the Bear Dance, and four to assorted Spanish dances. Each of these dances, significantly, was imported. The art historian Jody

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Blake has argued that the importation of social dances such as the Argentine tango and the Bear Dance combined elements of the ‘primitive’ with a desire to be modern. The exotic origins of these dances in conjunction with their fast tempos and forceful rhythms thus alluded to the very characteristics of modern urban life that appealed to the Parisian avant-garde.26 Although all of Severini’s images of the dance deal with issues of gender, the images of the Argentine tango are among his most sexualized images. The intertwined limbs and fused pelvises of the dancers are quite capable of expressing the controversial and risqué nature of this dance and the magnetic pull that it had on Severini.

By late 1913 and 1914 Severini’s images grew increasingly abstract, a tendency that more or less mirrored Robert Delaunay’s own forays into abstraction. In these paintings Severini’s dancers are reduced to their most basic elements—light, color, movement, and form—and they become a series of rhythms and instinctual urges. The dancer’s body is dissolved and dispersed throughout space and time, infiltrating and taking over the minds of her observers: whether these are the patrons of the dance-hall or those viewing the painting. These images are often devoid of any explicit reference to the sexualized body of the female; rather, she is transformed into a primal force that both attracts and repels the beholder by virtue of her energized form. Severini clearly saw the dancer as a metaphor for an altered state of mind, one that was linked to the state of modernity. As his paintings grow more and more abstract, this link becomes increasingly clear.

After 1914 Severini’s intense focus on the dance let up somewhat as a result of Marinetti’s request that the Futurists begin to paint subjects related to World War I and

the group’s interventionist desires for Italy. However, he still painted the dance when he got a chance, continuing to work through his ideas of analogy and trying out new forms of painting such as a rotated canvas in *Danseuse=Helice=Mer of 1915* and a collage type painting with movable parts in *Danseuse Articulée* later the same year (figs. 5-22 and 5-23). His final paintings of dancers, completed in late 1915 or early 1916, which seem to be variations on the same figure of a Spanish dancer, have more in common with the Cubist paintings of his Parisian friends and gradually shift away from Futurist dynamism to the cubist fractures that would define his postwar paintings. (figs. 5-24 and 5-25).

Severini never explicitly identified himself as a character in paintings done of dance-halls. However, there is one possible exception. This is an oil painting done in the beginning of 1910, just before the artist joined Futurism, *Danseurs au Monico* (fig. 5-13). In fact this is the first known painting the artist ever completed of the dance. The existence of this painting points to two things; first that he was interested in the realm of dance-halls before he signed on with Futurism, and second that Severini had at least a passing interest in males and females mixing together on a dance floor (this also occurs in the much harder to read *Pan Pan à Monico* from 1911). However, while the *Pan Pan* shows the tumultuous state of the Monico in its time of glory, the previous painting depicts a calmer scene of pairs of dancers likely doing some kind of a waltz on a much less crowded dance floor.

What makes this image particularly interesting is the presence of a couple in the foreground. The woman depicted is fairly characterless with her dark dress and hair. However, the man shows nearly all the tropes of Severini’s self-portraiture. Although it

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27 Although these war paintings fall outside the scope of my dissertation, it should be noted that stylistically these works shared much with Severini’s analogue paintings.
cannot be proven that this is in fact a self-portrait of Severini, the clothing, hairstyle and the monocle (which he took to wearing from this point forth) all point to a certain identification with the man in the painting. Whether this is merely an acknowledgement on Severini’s part that he did take part in activities such as those depicted or whether he thought of it as an actual self-portrait is not important. What is more relevant is that this is the only time in the years before WWI where Severini shows a man very like himself as an integral part of the dance-hall, something he adamantly claims in his autobiography with his statements about being a talented dancer and a regular at these locales.

Many of the images of dancers that Severini completed during his Futurist years are unique in that they try to visualize the principles of analogies written about for his ill-fated “Futurist Manifesto on Plastic Analogies”. In this treatise Severini goes back to his earliest Futurist painting to try and tie his career together and make these analogical paintings into the logical conclusion of several years of work. For example, he relies very heavily on one of his first Futurist paintings, *Travel Memories*. Each object in *Travel Memories* was chosen because it conjured up particular memories for the artist. As Bergson states, “by choosing images as dissimilar as possible, any one of them will be prevented from usurping the place of the intuition it is instructed to call forth.”28 Severini recalls this statement in his autobiography by commenting that he: “had assembled all the things that had impressed and captivated me during a trip to Italy and also in Paris, without worrying about the unity of time and place. Objects were depicted only because I liked them, so they had to harmonize and fit together.”29 This idea of the harmonization

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of images brings us back to Bergson’s declaration that objects do not naturally possess individual boundaries but run together to create a perceived continuity of time and space. The actual location and timing of each event or of each memory is insignificant because the act of recollecting unites them through an intuitive process.

Mark Antliff states that this painting is a ‘paradigmatic’ example of simultaneity because of its defiance of perspectival logic and its thematic groups of disparate images. Antliff also mentions that Travel Memories takes the form of a ‘convergence,’ of disparate memories spiraling in towards a collective center. This is certainly a reading that is supported by Bergson’s statement (quoted above in its entirety) that “through a convergence of their action” images “direct the consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to seize on.” However, I want to suggest that this painting could also be read as a centrifugal form, wherein the well serves as the starting point for a series of associated memories, all of which spread out exponentially from the center of the composition. Another quote from Bergson’s An Introduction to Metaphysics equally serves to support this reading of Severini’s painting:

“next I perceive memories more or less adherent to these perceptions and which serve to interpret them; these memories are, so to speak, as if detached from the depth of my person and drawn to the periphery by perceptions resembling them; they are fastened on me without being absolutely myself… All these elements with their well-defined forms appear to me to be all the more distinct from myself the more they are distinct from one another. Turned outwards from within, together they constitute the surface of a sphere which tends to expand and lose itself in the external world.”

31 Bergson, Metaphysics, 195.
32 Ibid., 192.
Each successive memory is further removed from the center (or the self), but is tied to other memories through association.

This analysis of *Travel Memories* also brings to light a problem inherent in attempting to render the landscape of the memory in paint. Severini’s hope was clearly that each object depicted in the painting would remind the viewer of his or her own travel memories, thus conjuring up intuitive association in minds of the viewer. However, the reality is that this painting is an intensely personal reflection on Severini’s unique travels and experiences. To those looking in from the outside, it is a collection of disparate images that are only related through the veiled workings of Severini’s mind. Bergson expresses this notion when he talks about the absolute and the infinite. He writes that seen from ‘without’ the intuitive associations of a mind take on the appearance of symbols and signs: “what is properly itself, what constitutes its essence, cannot be perceived from without, being internal by definition, nor be expressed by symbols, being incommensurable with everything else.”33 The unity of time and space that Severini hoped to create in *Travel Memories* is thus largely impenetrable to his audience, who reads it only as a system of signs, which decoded gives a glimpse of the interior of the artist, but cannot come close to his intuition. As Bergson stated, “it is impossible to travel back to an intuition one has not had.”34

It is important to realize that Severini did not continue on the path that he had embarked upon with *Travel Memories*. Perhaps the impossibility of rendering the internal

33 Ibid., 189.
34 Ibid., 213.
landscape proved too daunting and ultimately frustrated the artist. Whatever the reason, *Travel Memories* was for Severini a kind of false start, an experimental foray into a Bergsonian realm that would find its highest expression in the artist’s later depictions of the dance-halls of Paris. However, the interest in memory, movement and a circular or expanding and contraction of light did make a clear impact on a series of dancing figures that he painted between 1913 and 1914. These paintings were among the most abstract that Severini ever attempted and he gave them names such as *Expansion de la Lumière (Centrifuge)* (fig. 5-26).

Severini painted these forms of light, or dancers being dissolved by the stage lighting in an attempt to follow the previously discussed Futurist precept of bringing the audience into the center of the painting. These works, with their expanding and contracting forms seem to either jump off the canvas or suck the viewer into the undulating waves of color seen within the frame. Importantly, they also dissolve the boundary between the painter and the dancer, as well as the painting and the spectator.

Severini’s apparent identification with the dancing figure leads to a complicated relationship to gender that has not yet been fully explored. All of his images of the dance focus on female figures, only occasionally referencing the male through the inclusion of a dance partner.\(^{35}\) These female-centered images both play into Futurist views on the role of women and also account for an alternate view that responded to the specific circumstances surrounding Severini’s participation in the Parisian avant-garde. Italian Futurism, as lead by Marinetti, did not view women in a particularly positive light: they

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\(^{35}\) Many of Severini’s early images of social dances, such as the tango or the Bear Dance, include a male figure as a way of referencing the social nature of the dance. However, after 1913 Severini’s images become more fully focused on the female and downplay the sexualized nature of the dances.
were not valued as cultural producers and only reluctantly given credit for their roles as biological producers. However, Clara Orban argues that despite his misogynistic tendencies, Marinetti displayed an ambiguity towards women that betrays an admiration for their primitive and sexualized qualities, concepts that are intimately linked in the minds of the Futurists.\(^{36}\) For example, Marinetti wrote in his manifesto on the cabaret in 1913 that,

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\text{the Variety Théâtre is a school of sincerity for man because it exalts his rapacious instincts and snatches every veil from woman, all the phrases, all the sighs, all the romantic sobs that mask and deform her. On the other hand it brings to light all woman’s marvelous animal qualities, her grasp, her powers of seduction, her faithlessness, and her resistance.}^{37}\]

Although Severini nominally agreed with Marinetti’s theories, his views are not necessarily identical to those of the Futurist leader and his paintings merit an independent exploration of the question of gender relationships.

In Severini’s images there is a simultaneous celebration of the dynamism of the female dancer and a pervading sense of apprehension towards this same form. Severini’s dancer is reduced to her most basic elements – light, color, movement, and form – she becomes a series of rhythms and instinctual urges, nearly losing her humanity. Her body is dissolved and dispersed throughout space and time, infiltrating and taking over the mind of her observers (both the patrons of the dance-hall and those viewing the painting). This view of the female dancer turns her into a threatening and mechanistic accumulation of primitive forces, capable of overwhelming and overcoming the (male) viewer. By

\(^{36}\) Clara Orban, “Women, Futurism, and Fascism,” in Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 53. It is also interesting to note that Marinetti apparently had a fairly normal married life outside of his Futurist activity.

reducing the figure to a series of forms and colors this threat is diminished and the female dancer is rendered impotent. Although Severini’s figures are intimidating in their overwhelming energy and expansiveness, they are also hypnotic and compelling as a result of these same qualities. Thus, despite the ominous undertones in Severini’s paintings, the viewer is often captivated by the vibrant, rainbow colors and the power of the swirling form, rhythm, and movement. By attempting to diffuse the threat of the female through the disintegration of the physical body, in many ways Severini has only succeeded in making her more appealing.

Related to this is the fact that so many of Severini’s images of the dance are interested in the audience as well as the central action. There is a certain loss of self that comes with the act of spectatorship that changes the way people are able to see the world. The audience’s rapt attention at the dance-halls suggests a complete self-identification and involvement in the act being performed. We can then take this a step further and recognize that the material nature of many of Severini’s paintings is meant to do the exact same thing—subsume the spectator of the painting and let them experience the dance-hall through Severini’s representations of it.

VII. The Last Futurist Years

The two known self-portraits dating from Severini’s final period of Futurism follow his tendency towards abstraction. The first of these is known only from a photo that shows the artist standing in front of a full-size pencil self-portrait at the Marlborough Gallery in London, where he had his first solo show. The drawing is also used to illustrate an article by Severini written for the occasion of the exhibition in the English journal
In this article, a small (cropped) replica of the drawing is placed directly beside a photograph of Severini in his classic stylish dress and monocle. Underneath the photograph is the caption, “Severini as he really is,” and underneath the drawing is written “Severini as Severini sees him (fig. 5-27).” Although the location of the actual drawing is not currently known, we can gather enough from the reproductions to conclude that the image in question is a more abstracted version of his previous self-portraits. It is not as strictly cubist as the earlier 1913 portrait but instead has a kind of softened vitality that makes the figure in the drawing appear to be in motion while depicting a static scene. It is difficult to know whether Severini looked in a mirror for this drawing or a photo of himself very like the one reproduced in the *Daily Express*. Many of the lines and characteristics between the photo and the drawing are similar, such as the hat, the monocle, and the jacket and tie.

More important than the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the painting, however, is its prominent placement in the Marlborough Gallery exposition. Although, there were several other portraits exhibited, including the pendant to the self-portrait, a portrait of Severini’s soon to be wife Jeanne Paul Fort, the majority of the images displayed in the gallery were dancers, specifically a group of the Bear Dance and a few Spanish dancers. These paintings mark a very significant break between the work that Severini was doing, in which you can largely point to specific body parts and dance steps, and a number of pastels and temperas that show the dancer in a completely decomposed manner, such as *Forms of a Dancer in the Light* (fig. 5-28). In the London exhibition however, Severini was still attempting to educate the public on how to read the artist’s paintings, as

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evidenced by his article in the *Daily Express*. Having a self-portrait front and center in the exhibition, and then choosing to have his photo taken with this piece, however, leads one to believe that having a self-portrait included in the show was incredibly important to Severini. He wanted his public to identify with him as the artist and to make the connection between a photographic portrait and the more abstract forms of the self-portrait. This was an important part of his self-fashioning. While in France he had already gained a reputation as a dandy and a painter of some note, the English did not have a clue who Gino Severini was. Although the Futurists had already had an exhibition in London it was not well-received, and Severini obviously felt some responsibility to update the English public as to his particular brand of Futurism. Thus, it was up to him, through this exhibition and the various articles accompanying it, to create a connection between the painter and his work, as well as between his work, himself and his words. It was crucially important that when the English public saw a Futurist painting they thought of Gino Severini, both as a member of the movement and also the member of that movement with the most caché abroad. Severini must have considered the consequences of being thought of as a dandy or at least some version thereof since London was, as we have seen, the very birthplace of dandyism.

Although the whereabouts of the aforementioned painting is unknown (it did make one more appearance at a group showing in Naples in 1914) it does not seem to follow the exhibition from London on to Berlin as did many of the pieces exhibited. In letters to Walden on 5 May 1913 Severini writes that he was making some new pieces to

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39 Fonti, 136.
replace those sold in London.\textsuperscript{40} On 27 May 1913 he wrote again saying that “today” he was sending the replacement pictures.\textsuperscript{41} One of these pictures was identified as a study for a self-portrait in oil that he was working on. This “Studio per ‘Self-Portrait Au Canotier’” or “Selbstporträt” as it was known in Berlin, was a fairly simple charcoal drawing showing the artist intersected by curving lines and in one case an almost complete ellipse (fig. 5-29). The only hint of color on the portrait, rare in Severini’s studies, are a few lines of blue chalk that make up the lines on his pinstriped shirt. The artist’s tie and the band around his ‘canotier’ are done in a charcoal so dense it seems to be black. There are also traces of white pastel or chalk seen on the shirt collar and the top of the hat. After the study’s showing in Berlin, its whereabouts were unknown until it showed up in The Hope and Abraham Melamed Collection in Milwaukee.\textsuperscript{42}

Severini must have started the oil painting for which the previous charcoal work was a study before he sent it off to Berlin, because the intersecting arcs and lines of the oil painting are nearly identical to the study. However, whereas the study has a simplicity to it given by the stark black and grey lines the oil painting appears much busier due to the nearly Neo-impressionistic staccato brush strokes that fill in the open spaces. Although the only version I was able to examine was in black and white, since the painting is in a private collection in Zurich, one can imagine a densely painted and bright self-portrait along the lines of his paintings of dancers at the time, such as Danseuses.

\textsuperscript{40} Letter from Severini to H. Walden, 5 May 1913, reproduced in Archivi del futurismo, 266.

\textsuperscript{41} Letter from Severini to H. Walden, 27 May 1913, reproduced in Archivi del futurismo, 269.

\textsuperscript{42} Hanson, 79.
espagnoles à Monico from 1913 (fig. 5-30). This painting, for all its difference in subject has the same curving arcs and simplified features of the oil portrait.

This self-portrait is also unique in that it is the last time Severini ever painted himself as a member of the Futurist movement. Although the exact time that the artist left the movement is not known, with estimates being as early as 1914 and as late as 1916, it is true that after a series of war paintings, presumably responding to Marinetti’s call for paintings of the war, in 1915 he had very little or no contact with the Futurist movement. Severini’s last letter to Marinetti was dated from Paris the 1 March 1915 and its tone is not one of great friendliness. He writes rather brusquely that “although my material circumstances are very difficult, as you can imagine, I do not want to you to take the little sum that is owed me for the drawing in the Grande Ille [the journal Grande Illustrazione] out of your own pocket. You did not show such generosity in moments that were much more terrible, and I don’t see why you should start showing it now. I hope you understand that it is much better if our business relationship remains as it is.”43 It is clear from this statement that Severini is tired of dealing with the leader/friend/financier role that Marinetti had undertook for all the Futurists in the beginning.

VIII. Conclusion

Using the self-portrait as well as the dance-hall as symbols of the complex and multivalent forces of modern life Severini was able to create works that responded to larger themes such as class conflict and the onset of technology and mass consumer culture while remaining ostensibly outside the realm of overt political and social critique.

43 Letter from Severini to Marinetti, 1 March 1915, conserved in the Beinecke Library, Yale University, reproduced in Anne Coffin Hanson.
As a self-styled dandy and an accomplished dancer, Severini not only empathized with the sexualized rhythms of his female counterparts, he painted images that catered to the fantasies of the bourgeois clientele who frequented the dance halls and the members of artistic bohemia who patronized the avant-garde Salons. His Futurist paintings of dancers merged the signs of licentiousness and modernity in a manner that epitomized the allure of bohemian culture. In the end, Severini was a hybrid figure who straddled both the Parisian and Italian avant-gardes and acted as a liaison between the two. He also recognized the potential of dance and popular culture to act as a bridge across the gap between bohemia and the bourgeoisie.
CONCLUSION

Gino Severini was a remarkable figure who consciously (and with great skill) negotiated his entry into French culture by fashioning a unique persona within the context of Parisian bohemia. As, I have demonstrated in this thesis, his process of assimilation entailed a stripping away of certain elements of his Italian identity while retaining others. Bohemia, as it was envisioned in the Parisian arrondissement of Montmartre specifically, constituted a social space in which Severini’s status as a foreigner and impoverished artist could be subsumed within the French conception of the artist-dandy, a personality type Severini actively cultivated as his own. While Severini was not the only foreign artist to embark on such a tremendous project of personal myth-making, he was perhaps the most successful member of the Italian pre-war avant-garde when it came to having a truly transnational career.¹

In chapter 1 we met a young Severini who in Rome had already gained exposure to French styles of painting as well as notions of bohemia through his intellectual circle and interest in foreign literature and philosophy (he mentioned Henri Mürger early in his autobiography). Moreover, early works such as his 1905 portrait titled La bohémienne (fig. 1-14) testify to his interest in social categories outside the norms of bourgeois propriety. Severini’s early decision to move to Montmartre upon his arrival in Paris in 1906 signaled his allegiance to that part of the city most identified with the bohemian myth. Moreover his involvement beginning in 1907 in the circle around Lugné-Poë’s

¹ In making this claim I acknowledge that other Italians found ways to participate in the transnational avant-garde: Amadeo Modigliani had a prolific, if short, career in Paris for example, while other members of the Futurist movement worked hard to disseminate their works and ideas throughout Europe. Severini, however, was unique in that he maintained his identity as a member of the Italian Futurists while living and working among members of the French avant-garde.
Théâtre de l’Oeuvre—a venue that had scandalized Paris through its production of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* and Marinetti *Le Roi Bombance*—further testifies to his early commitment to both symbolism and the bohemian precepts informing that movement (chronicled in chapter 2). Concurrently Severini began developing his Neo-Impressionist technique within the context of subject matter favored by the French Symbolists as evidenced by early works such as *Le chat noir* in 1910 (fig. 1-9). As I have demonstrated, this painting not only alludes to the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, an author adored by the French Symbolists, and the infamous cabaret of the same name, it should be seen within the context of a related work from 1911, *Danseuse obsédante* (fig. 3-13), where the black cat appears again: this time as an *argot* sign for the sexually available females who inhabited Parisian dance halls.

In chapter 3 we see this early interest in depicting the dancing figure through Neo-Impressionist brush-strokes evolve into a project of deconstructing the female form in movement first through an aesthetic interpretation of the lights, sound, and atmosphere of the dance-hall stage and then through an increasing interest in abstraction. As I also demonstrate, the avant-garde dancers Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan exhibited parallel interests, and even if Severini never explicitly painted this type of ‘high-brow’ dance the similarities between their artistic projects and crossover within social circles makes the connection too strong to ignore.

Works such as *Le chat noir* also set the stage for Severini’s official entry into the ranks of Italian Futurism in 1910 (chapter 4), which ultimately led to complications as Severini’s initial project of furthering the Futurist cause devolved into a desire to distance himself from the bellicose nationalism of his Italian colleagues, all the while absorbing
the Futurists’ rhetorical embrace of modernity. This led Severini to develop his own unique approach to Futurist dynamism, which combined a style indebted to French Neo-Impressionism, Bergsonian philosophy, and the projects of Parisian colleagues such as Pablo Picasso and Robert Delaunay.

In chapter 5 I shift the focus of my discussion from Severini’s signature subject matter, the Parisian dance-hall, to a number of self-portraits that the artist completed throughout the years leading up to World War I. While the majority of these self-portraits are not specifically related to his images of the dance (with one possible exception, seen in fig. 5-13) the conscious attempt at self-fashioning and the progression of the artistic growth seen in Severini’s images of himself mirrors that seen in his works depicting the dancing figure. Through an examination of these self-portraits and more commercially oriented works made around the same time, we can draw all the disparate threads of Severini’s life together to create an overarching portrait of an artist who saw himself as a self-styled dandy and an accomplished dancer and who was able to successfully navigate the complex worlds of bohemia, the bourgeois art market, and the international avant-garde.

Severini’s Futurist connections as well as his experiments with abstraction came to a close with the dawning of World War I. Indeed, even before this date we begin to see a crisis of his Italian identity and a programmatic disavowal of Futurism. Like everything Severini did, this was accomplished in a very self-reflective and conscious manner. In many ways this was an almost predictable outcome of a process that had in fact begun with his arrival in Paris in 1906. His marriage to Jeanne Fort (effectively a diplomatic union between the avant-garde cultures of Italy and France) and his decision to go ahead
with a solo exhibition in London in 1913 already signaled his distance from Marinetti and the desire to forge his own artist’s persona independent of that developed by his Futurist colleagues. The crisis of World War I further emphasized this by bringing out those aspects of Futurism—bellicose nationalism and the glorification of war—that Severini had never embraced while a member of the movement. His last Futurist works, although they were the pro-war paintings required by Marinetti when Italy entered the war on the French side in 1915, in fact signaled the artist’s continuing identification with France by depicting French topics in an increasingly Cubist manner. Thus, the paintings contained allusions to French mobilization while simultaneously endorsing Marinetti’s celebration of the war machine, a hybrid status that was echoed by Severini’s personal life. By the beginning of 1916 all connections to Futurism were severed and Severini dramatically embraced what Kenneth Silver refers to as a ‘return to order’ in both subject matter and style (figs. c-1 and c-2). These works were decidedly anti-Futurist and part of a broader re-orientation in tune with specifically French wartime nationalism.2

It was not until after World War I, however, and the publication of his first major theoretical treatise Du cubisme au classicisme that this shift took a concrete form.3 By divorcing himself from the stylistic forms of Futurism, Severini also turned away from the movement’s atheistic tendencies and revolutionary politics. While Marinetti and the remaining Futurists aligned themselves initially with Mussolini’s nascent Fascist movement in the years directly after the war (only snubbing this connection when it

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3 I have explored the publication of Du cubisme au classicisme and Severini’s shift to a classical style in my article “Spiritual Crisis and the ‘Call to Order’: The Early Aesthetic Writings of Gino Severini and Jacques Maritain,” in Word & Image, vol. 26, issue 1 (2010), 59-67.
became clear that Fascism had moved too far to the Right), Severini rejected this line of thought and instead embraced the conservative beliefs of the Catholic Church and the teachings of the classical masters. Again this was a conscious identification with French culture; while Catholicism is of course native to both Italy and France, the specific type of Catholicism Severini allied himself with was the Neo-Thomism espoused by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain.

Although Severini went on to have a long and increasingly successful career (at least in monetary terms) he never again returned to the vivid and almost frenetic experimentation of his early Futurist years. This does not signify, however, a complete break between the project and aims of the artist’s pre- and post-World War I careers. Severini’s life can be seen as one long exercise in self-fashioning and posturing, first in conjunction with the Futurist movement, then with Cubism, and finally with spiritual and classical forms. While this dissertation only addresses the first part of Severini’s career, my work on this crucial figure of European modernism is not finished and I intend to explore the post World War I era of Severini’s life and the wider phenomena of spiritualism, Catholic philosophy, and the arts in my future research. The same characteristics that allowed the Italian artist to successfully negotiate the world of the Parisian avant-garde and to use his identity as a foreigner to thrive in a very politically and socially charged atmosphere continued to serve him as he forged ahead in the altered

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4 Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and politics: between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 118. Severini was not the only member of the Futurist movement to distance himself from Marinetti’s political and aesthetic choices during these years; of the original five members to sign the Manifesto of the Futurist Painters on 11 February 1910 only Giacomo Balla would continue to adhere to the movement in its postwar form.
context of the interwar years, thus making an apparent refutation of his Futurist years explainable as part of the artist’s overarching life trajectory.
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BIOGRAPHY

Zoë Marie Jones earned a B.A. in art history and romance studies from the Robert D. Clark Honors College at the University of Oregon in 2001. While a Ph.D. student at Duke University she received the Mary Duke Biddle Curatorial Fellowship at the Nasher Museum of Art, a Summer Travel Grant from the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies, the Duke Graduate School International Research Travel Award, the Bass Instructorship Award for Advanced Graduate Students (for a proposed course entitled “The Transnational Avant-Garde and Popular Culture”), and several Conference Funding Fellowship. She has been very successful earning outside funding and honors, including spending a semester as an exchange student with the Fondazione Scuola Studi Avanzati in Venezia’s Doctoral Program in Theory and History of the Arts, spending four summers at the Venice International University, Summer Institute in the Humanities, receiving the Camargo Foundation Residential Fellowship in Cassis, France, and the Fulbright IIE Commission Grant to Italy. She has taught “Intro to the History of Art II” for the Duke Summer Session and also “Modernism, Avant-gardism, and Visual Art, 1900-1945” in the fall of 2010. Her publications include “‘Spiritual Crisis and the ‘Call to Order’: The Early Aesthetic Writings of Gino Severini and Jacques Maritain,” in Word & Image, vol. 26, issue 1 (2010), 59-67 (a revised version of this article also appeared in the 2010 volume The Maritain Factor: Taking Neo-Thomism into Interwar Modernism edited by Rajesh Heynickx). She was born 6 September 1978 in Fairbanks, Alaska.
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Pour voir et comprendre ce qu'on voit, il n'est pas besoin de raison. Les critiques qui dénoncent la beauté d'une peinture logiquement, qui cherchent la composition et la couleur sont, pour la plupart, malheureusement pressionnés par le tableau de l'œuvre qu'ils ont devant les yeux mais par tous ceux qu'ils vivent précédemment avant de voir ce dernier.

Pourtant, Gino Severini écrit en son petit atelier de l'autre côté de la couverture de *L’Oeuvre*:

Pourtant, cet artiste fin nous plaît longs excursions dans le travail, en peintures derniers, nous signons par sa fenêtre ouverte, ses essais sur l’œuvre tendre, où la couleur ensemble d’une nouvelle est parfois apparente, notée par un artiste épris et sincère.

Des fois, on peut suivre la vision de Severini à travers ses œuvres, ses portraits d’un dessin, si honnête en dépit de la peinture qui le rendent en orner — il le sent et il sait parfait. Dans ses œuvres intimes, des visages, des visages, des visages, Gino Severini est plus libre. — Encore un peu, et le graveur, par logique, deviendra un maître. Gino Severini fait ce qu’il veut, il peut se tromper, mais il ne refusera rien, il terrasse sa palette de déduction. Dans sa manière il garde une simplicité qui fait songer aux anciens peintres religieux et au moyen de son pays, de la fenêtre de *L’Oeuvre*, en montrant un portrait de femme à corps blanc assise dans un fauteuil bleu dédiée de la technique de certains artistes chorégraphiques sur la décomposition des couleurs dont il y a une vingtaine d’années, ou fut accompli par l’audace des bleus et des blancs, ce portrait fait prévoir l’œuvre de Severini.

Mais sa plus belle conquête — criole peut-être — est sans aucun doute la belle jeune seiance que Severini vient d’acheter en interpré- tant Mlle Sophana Massud, la jeune artiste Lih. Severini est tenté capturé par l’aspect magique de son modèle. Il a trente ans maintenant, et devant lui, il est impitoyable.

Peintre ne serait besoin d’autre raison pour justifier ces quelques lignes que cette image, s’il fallait en commencer le motif.

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